

"Amari is magical!"
—ANGIE THOMAS

"The heroine we all need."
—NIC STONE

AMARI

AND THE

DESPICABLE WONDERS



#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
B. B. ALSTON

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AMARI

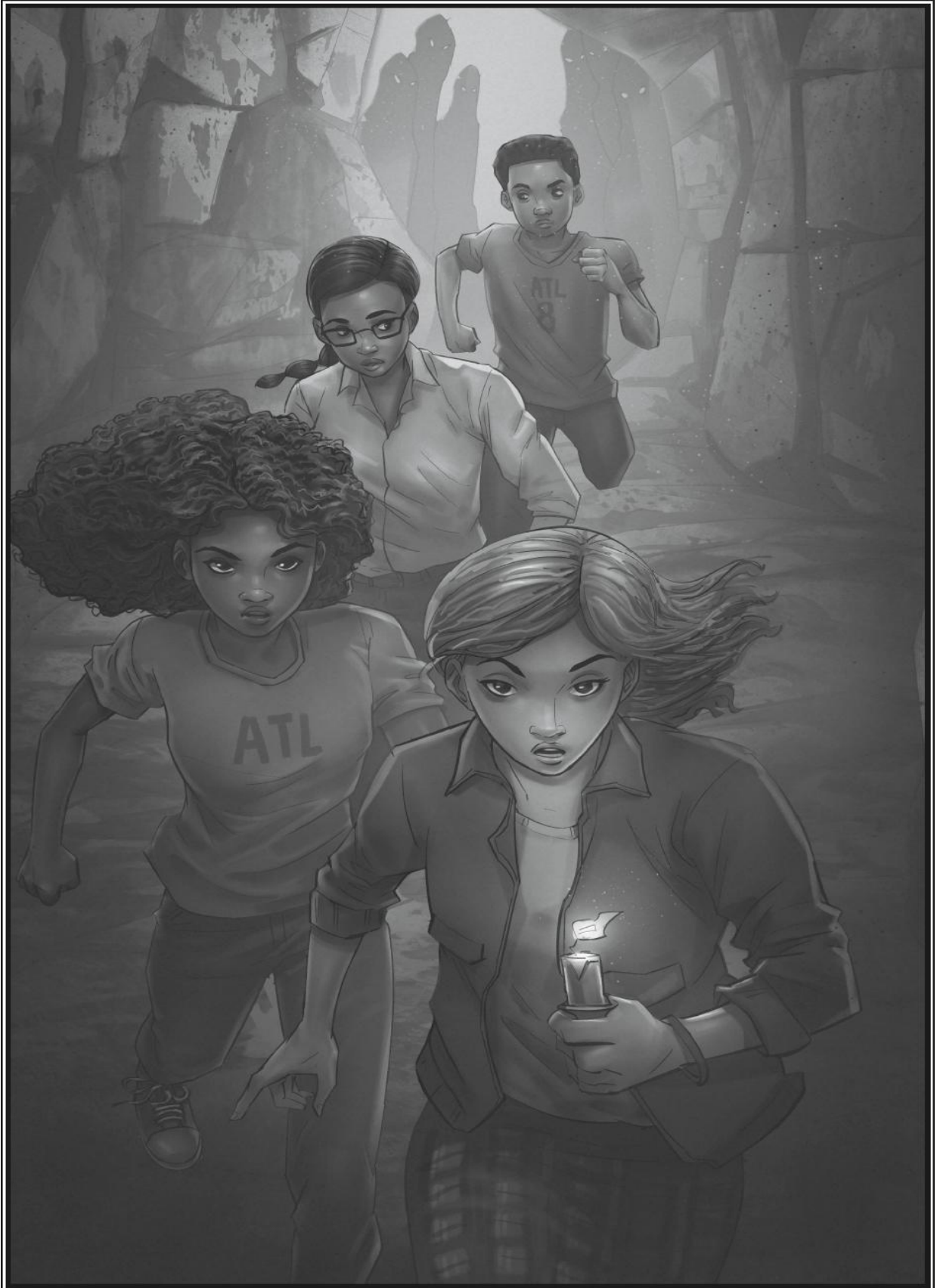
— AND THE —
DESPICABLE
WONDERS



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GODWIN AKPAN

BALZER + BRAY

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers



Dedication



*For my dad, Bruce, who always set the example for what a good man should
be*

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WHEN QUINTON TOLD US WE'D BE HIDING OUT SOMEWHERE top secret, I pictured an underground bunker way out in the wilderness. Something

totally off the grid and really high tech—I'm talking fingerprint scanners and surveillance cameras hidden in the trees. Maybe even a trusted werewolf or two to scare off anyone—or *anything*—that comes too close.

It's the kind of protection you'd expect from the supernatural world's most famous Special Agent.

Instead, I'm sitting cross-legged between Jayden and Elsie on the floor of an outdated motel room. Lots of pink-and-red-striped wallpaper and double beds that are so stiff, it's comfier down here on the carpet.

While my brother is out doing who knows what, the three of us crowd around Elsie's laptop. Onscreen, the Vanderbilt Hotel burns, bright flames and billowing black smoke blotting out the stars above. Fire trucks and ambulances race to the scene, sirens blaring.

I can't look away, even as a jumbled knot of guilt and dread churns in my gut. *This is my fault.*

Words scroll across the bottom of the screen.

Breaking News: Magicians Attack American Bureau!

As the footage loops, a broadcaster gives commentary. *"Last night's torching of the Vanderbilt Hotel, a front for the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs in Atlanta, sent dozens of known worlders to nearby hospitals. Now the entire supernatural world holds its breath, with many fearing the incident could spark a larger conflict, one as devastating as the Ancient War.*

"With Prime Minister Merlin and the Supernatural World Congress still frozen in time, it will be up to the new acting Prime Minister, Elaine Harlowe, to respond. The post had belonged to Deputy Prime Minister Bane, before he unceremoniously quit just hours after the attack. Harlowe's meteoric rise, first through the ranks of the Bureau and now supernatural world government, is unprecedented.

"Before the time freeze, many officials believed the centuries-old magician threat had finally come to an end after the demise of Raoul Moreau, the last remaining Night Brother. But now another magician, Dylan Van Helsing, has emerged as our world's most dangerous criminal. Terrifying—albeit unconfirmed—reports claim that he is backed by hundreds of previously unknown magicians—"

Me and Jayden both jump as the computer slams shut.

“That’s enough news for one day,” says Elsie, shooting me a concerned glance. “Don’t you think?”

Jayden nods. “It *was* gettin’ kinda depressing.”

“We’re stuck in this motel room until Quinton gets back,” I say. “The least we can do is keep track of what’s going on.”

“Sure . . . ,” says Elsie. “But that’s all we’ve done since we checked in this morning. The othernet is nothing but doom and gloom. Let’s try to think about something else for a while.”

“I don’t want to think about anything else,” I say, shaking my head. “The Vanderbilt Hotel is in ashes because *I* let Dylan win the Great Game. People are in the hospital because he’s wearing the Crown of Vladimir instead of me. If he hurts anyone else, I need to know.”

I make a move to reopen the laptop, but Jayden grabs it first, pushing it out of my reach. I frown at him, but he’s looking at Elsie. They seem to be having a whole conversation with just their eyes. It ends with Jayden giving Elsie an encouraging nod.

My best friend takes a deep breath before turning to face me again. “Jayden and I have been talking and . . . we’re worried about you.”

We’ve been together all day—how’d they do that without me knowing? And what exactly have they been saying about me?

“You were in the bathroom—” Elsie starts to explain but cuts herself short. “That’s not important. Your aura has been blue for most of the afternoon, and it’s only gotten worse. I—no, we think maybe you’re being too hard on yourself.”

There’s no point denying it. As a weredragon, Elsie can tell exactly how I’m feeling from the color aura my emotions give off. So I shrug and say, “I’ve been kinda down but I’m fine. I’ve got to be if we’re going to fix my mistakes.”

“That’s the thing,” says Elsie. “What’s happening isn’t *your* mistake. Nobody could’ve guessed Director Harlowe was using her supernatural ability to control both the Bureau and the Prime Minister. And it’s not like the Great Game was fair—Cozmo forced your hand in the final challenge. *He’s* the one who handed Dylan control of the League of Magicians. If Harlowe and Dylan go to war with one another, that’s not on you.”

“You done your best,” adds Jayden. “Can’t ask for more than that.”

I’m grateful to my friends for trying to make me feel better but, truth is, I’m not sure I deserve it. “My best wasn’t good enough. I didn’t

accomplish anything I set out to do this summer.”

Jayden shakes his head. “Nah—”

“Yes!” I interrupt, my frustration finally bubbling over. “Merlin and the Supernatural World Congress are still frozen. And when Director Harlowe showed up to gloat, all I could do was run away. Els, we left Lara behind to fend for herself . . .” I pause, fighting down a rush of emotion. “And what about everyone else at the Bureau? None of them are safe from Harlowe’s mind control. Maybe you’re right that I didn’t cause what’s happening out there, but I had chances to stop it, and I failed. You can’t deny that.”

It’s quiet—clearly neither of my friends knows what to say. I hate that I raised my voice like that—it makes me feel worse than I already did.

“Sorry.” I blow out a sigh. “It’s not you guys. After last night, all I want is another chance to get things right. But so far we’ve done nothing but wait around this motel room.”

“Quinton brought us here for good reason,” says Elsie, taking my brother’s side as I knew she would.

Elsie’s the biggest VanQuish fan on the planet. Special Agents really are the superheroes of the supernatural world, and nobody is bigger than VanQuish—aka the team of Quinton and Maria Van Helsing. If my brother had his partner instead of his sister, maybe he wouldn’t be out there alone. But Harlowe had Maria arrested for nothing.

“It’s not safe for us right now,” Elsie continues. “Did you forget that Harlowe wanted us sent to the Sightless Depths? Or that Dylan tried to burn the two of us before he set fire to the Vanderbilt Hotel?”

“Quinton is the one who told me to keep fighting,” I say. “That I shouldn’t just lie down and surrender. Of course, if he really meant that he would’ve taken me with him.”

When Jayden raises an eyebrow, I realize I accidentally said that last part out loud.

“So that’s why you all cranky,” he says. “You being treated like a kid when you thought y’all was gonna be partners.”

I can’t help sulking a little. “Maybe?” I admit.

“That still might happen,” says Elsie. “It hasn’t even been a full day since everything went down. You and I have come up with enough plans to know they take time. Especially when it comes to deciding who’s gonna do what. He probably just wants us safe while he figures out our next move.”

She grins. “I *totally* get it, though—whenever one of my experiments goes wrong, the first thing I want to do is try again.”

I rest my chin in my palm and sigh. “I know you’re right—it’s just hard. Sorry again for being such a grump.”

Jayden just shrugs.

Elsie shakes her head. “No apologies necessary. Talk to your brother when he gets back. I bet he’s got a good reason for leaving you behind.”

My pocket buzzes and I reach inside for the boring flip phone Quinton gave each of us. I’m still sad I had to give up the apps on my smartphone, but this thing is supposed to be untraceable.

**New Text Message from Q:
On my way back**

“Looks like I’ll get my chance soon,” I say, showing Jayden and Elsie the message.

“Ask if he bringin’ food,” says Jayden. “‘Cause I’m starving.”

I glance at the pile of empty chip bags stacked on the bed. “Boy, you’ve been munching on Doritos since we got here.”

He sighs. “Chips are good, but burgers are better—so much better.”

“A burger *does* sound tasty,” Elsie agrees.

Before I can send a food request, my phone buzzes again.

**New Text Message from Q:
Heads up: Mama stopping by after work.**

Mama’s coming here to the motel? It’s already after ten at night. What if she’s followed?

I make myself relax. Quinton wouldn’t let her near this place unless he knew it was safe. That’s when another, more pressing worry skips through my head. Last night, Dylan and I had a nasty battle to settle the final challenge of the Great Game. And I didn’t just lose, I showed up to my apartment looking like it too. It was lucky Mama wasn’t home to see.

I’ve already changed out of my beat-up Junior Agent uniform and washed the dirt and grass from my hair. I even cleared the nicks and scrapes from my hands and forearms using the Hurried Healing gel in the first aid kit.

But there's still a bad scratch along my chin. The gel didn't do much for that one—according to the bottle, deeper cuts can take up to twelve hours to clear.

"You good?" Jayden asks, staring.

I point to the scratch. "Mama's on her way here, and that lady is gonna freak when she sees me."

He winces. "Yeah, Mrs. P don't play when it comes to you."

Heading to the closet, I grab the bottle of Hurried Healing gel and start for the bathroom.

Elsie follows. "The warning on the bottle says not to use too much."

"I didn't survive the Great Game just to have Mama kill me instead." I step into the bathroom and shut the door behind me.

"Just be careful," Elsie calls.

"Will do," I say.

The mirror in here is grimy, and the light bulb is dim. Not the best combination, but I take a long look at myself anyway. No matter which way I turn my face that scratch is front and center.

If I still had my illusions, changing my appearance would be easy. I could snap my fingers and look however I wanted. But losing the Great Game cost me more than just the Crown—Dylan took my magic too. Thinking about it stirs up an awful feeling that I'm not whole.

I flip the bottle around and read the warning again.

Warning: *Overmedicating may cause unexpected side effects.*

It's enough to make me rethink putting on more gel . . . at least until I take another look at my chin. Mama's even more protective than Quinton. If she thinks I've been hurt, she might tell my brother to keep me locked away, out of danger. Well, I've had enough of sitting around—I need to be out there doing stuff that matters.

I tilt the bottle to dab a bit of gel on my finger but suddenly feel dizzy. I blink as my vision goes so hazy I have to hold on to the sink to keep my balance.

That's when I hear a voice. It's faint—barely a whisper. "*You'll be punished for what you've done.*"

I whip my head around, eyeing every inch of the tiny bathroom. Chipped tile on the walls. Ripped shower curtain. A toilet that barely flushes.

I'm the only one in here.
But knowing that doesn't stop my heart thundering in my chest.
Because I know whose voice that was. I'd recognize it anywhere.
Dylan Van Helsing.



A SUDDEN KNOCK ON THE BATHROOM DOOR NEARLY makes me jump out of my skin. “W-who’s there?”

“Um, your best friend?” Elsie says through the door. “Are you almost done? I need to show you something.”

It’s just Els. I shut my eyes and try to calm down. “It’s unlocked.”

Elsie bursts in and plops down on the edge of the bathtub. “Sorry to interrupt, but you’ve got to see this.” She holds out her hand and dark scales ripple up her arm, replacing skin. Dragon scales. “I’ve been practicing . . .” Her words trail off as our eyes meet. “Amari—your aura is practically neon yellow.”

I’ve been around Elsie long enough to know that the brighter the aura, the more intense the emotion. She can see how flustered I am.

I try to downplay it anyway. “It’s nothing; tell me about your shifting.”

“Something is clearly bothering you,” she answers. “Out with it.”

I want to pretend like nothing happened. But keeping secrets from Elsie never ends up being the right call. So I take a deep breath and say, “I thought I heard something before you came in. A voice—*his* voice.”

Elsie looks confused for a moment before her eyes widen. “Dylan’s?”

I swallow and nod. “Weird, huh?”

“‘Scary’ is the word I’d use.” Elsie shivers. “Are you sure? What did he say?”

“Something about me being punished. Which doesn’t exactly make sense seeing as he’s already tried to kill me multiple times.” My eyes flit to the broken bottle of healing gel in the sink. I must’ve dropped it. “It really freaked me out.”

“I can tell.” Elsie follows my eyes to the sink. “There might be an explanation.” She starts tapping away at her computer, leaning in close to the screen. “I knew it. I’m on the company website.” She starts to read. “‘Please use Hurried Healing gel only as directed. Warning: Using too much may cause unexpected side effects, including temporary but extremely saggy wrinkles, patches of rabbit fur, *hallucinations* . . .’”

“Except I didn’t actually use the gel,” I say. “I got too dizzy.”

Elsie frowns. “Has Dylan ever sent you mental messages before?”

I shake my head. “It’s always been tech magic—text messages, him showing up on my TV screen, stuff like that.”

“Then he’s either found a new way to contact you, or . . .”

“Or what?” I ask.

“Maybe you had a panic attack,” she says. “You’ve been out of sorts all day.”

“You’re saying it was all in my head?” I ask.

She shrugs. “You’re the strongest person I know, but you’re putting all this pressure on yourself. And that’s on top of us almost dying last night. It’s okay to not be okay.”

I’m not sure what to say, so I just settle for, “I don’t have time for a panic attack.”

“Not sure it works like that,” says Elsie. “We should probably tell Quinton when he gets back.”

“No way,” I say. And before she can protest, I add, “If it happens again, I’ll tell him right away. I just don’t want Quinton to look at me differently because of some random fluke thing. Can we please keep this between us for now?”

“It’s not something to be ashamed of,” says Elsie.

“Please,” I repeat.

“Fine,” says Elsie. “But I’m holding you to what you said.”

“Understood.”

Another knock sounds, and I turn to find Jayden poking his head through the open doorway.

“Quinton back. Says he wanna talk to us real quick—before Mrs. P get here.” His eyes move back and forth between us. “Everything a’ight?”

Elsie drops her eyes.

“We’re good,” I cut in. “Totally fine.”

“Cool,” he says. “Don’t look like you had much luck with that scratch.”

“Yeah.” I sigh.

“Still cute, though,” he adds.

My cheeks burn, and Jayden freezes, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else. He stammers, “Uh . . . I meant it like . . . in general. You know, like, wow that tree sure is cute. Get what I’m saying?”

I lift an eyebrow. *Did that boy just compare me to a tree?*

Elsie stifles a grin. “Let’s go see what Quinton wants.”

My brother is bent over two laptops at the little desk in the corner of the motel room. Even though I’m still annoyed at him for leaving me behind, I can’t help the smile that fills my face. After two years asleep because of a nasty curse, my big brother is wide awake.

But he doesn’t look happy.

I clear my throat. “More bad news?”

Quinton nods without looking up from the computer. “An image from last night’s attack at the Vanderbilt Hotel has popped up online. And not just the othernet—it’s on known world social media too. Somebody—likely a Watcher—got a really good photo of Dylan just after he started the fire.”

“Wait, it’s on normal social media too?” I ask. Keeping the supernatural world secret is the whole point of the Bureau. Humans just don’t react well to anything they don’t understand. Which is what makes Watchers so dangerous—they might be ordinary people, but they know enough to suspect that magic and the supernatural are real, and they spend their days trying to prove it. Most folks probably think the fire was just a terrible accident, but I’ll bet the location got the attention of every Watcher in Atlanta.

“The Bureau is taking the photo down as fast as it’s being posted,” says Quinton, “spreading the rumor that it’s a shot from a new movie, so it isn’t real. But even if they manage to convince the known world it’s fake, every supernatural knows Dylan’s face. And they’ll be curious who the others in the photo are.”

“Others?” Elsie asks.

Waving us over, Quinton turns one of the laptops around to face us.

Elsie gasps, and Jayden shakes his head. I shudder, my heart racing. Onscreen, hovering above the blaze, is Dylan, his scowling face glowing in the firelight. But he’s not alone. In the air on either side of him are dozens of magicians in bright red cloaks. From the League of Magicians—men and women who are all under Dylan’s leadership now that he’s won the Great Game and the Crown of Vladimir.

“They’re not even trying to hide,” says Elsie. “They *want* everyone to know who caused the fire.”

“Dylan’s declaring war,” I say quietly. “This is the fight he’s always wanted.”

Jayden crosses his arms. “Look like Harlowe got much bigger problems than us.”

Quinton nods. “The photo is already trending on Eurg, and by this afternoon there won’t be a bigger story in the supernatural world. Dylan leading an army of magicians is about as frightening as it gets. And the fact that he was bold enough to attack the Bureau itself—without a care for potentially exposing our world—means there’ll be an outcry for the Prime Minister and the Bureau to respond. But this actually helps us, because

Jayden is right. Dylan and the League of Magicians will have Harlowe's full attention."

"So what do we do now?" I ask.

"As soon as we can, we head to a safer location," says Quinton. "Someplace the Bureau won't think to look for us. I've reached out to some old friends, but it's short notice, and I don't want word getting out that I'm awake. If Harlowe is as vindictive as you say, I can't give her another reason to use Maria against us. So we may have to settle for someplace less than ideal. Once we're there, we can put together a plan to free the Bureau from Harlowe's control."

"What about the League of Magicians?" I ask. "Aren't they the bigger threat? As much as I hate Harlowe, she isn't setting buildings on fire."

"Normally I'd agree," says Quinton. "But the four of us don't have much of a chance against the entire League—hundreds of magicians. Gaining control of the Bureau, on the other hand, is only a matter of stopping Harlowe. Once the Bureau is free of her control, we can put an end to the time freeze and get Merlin, the true Prime Minister, back. Under his leadership, we'll have an army of our own to face the League."

The way he explains it makes sense. I've felt Merlin's immense power before, so I know what a difference it would make to have him fighting with us. Even so, folks might get hurt while we're off trying to trap Harlowe. Especially if Dylan doesn't care about keeping his actions hidden from the known world.

"Um, guys?" says Elsie. "You might wanna see this."

"What is it?" asks Quinton.

"My Eurq notifications just started going crazy. Looks like I got tagged in a post by *Rumors & Whisperings*, the, um, gossip magazine. Quinton, I—I think someone already knows you're awake."

I peek over Elsie's shoulder to follow along as she reads aloud.

Rumors & Whisperings 

Posted 1 minute ago

Psst, listen up . . . there's a certain photo going around that's got the entire supernatural world in an uproar. Dylan Van Helsing? Unknown magicians? A fire at the Vanderbilt Hotel?

Many of you are waking up to the realization that your families may not be safe. Who knows what the next target might be? Times like these call for heroes . . . and it just so happens that the QUINTessential hero has returned to VANQUISH the threat. 'Course, you didn't hear it from us. . . .

Quinton shakes his head. "No one should know I'm awake. I've been so careful."

"But it has to be you they're talking about," says Elsie. "Why else would they use the word 'vanquish'?"

"That was definitely on purpose," I agree. "They're even being cute about it. Look how they capitalized the 'QUINT' in quintessential." I look from Elsie to my brother. "Maybe somebody saw you?"

"I've been teleporting in and out of places, and there's no chance my contacts would spill to some gossip magazine."

Elsie steps to the curtains and peeks out. "Unless someone's spying on us."

Quinton turns the second laptop around. The screen is covered in surveillance videos showing every angle of the motel, even the parking lot. "If anyone even got close to this motel room, a dozen alarms would've gone off and we'd have teleported right out of here."

"Maybe they snuck in," says Jayden. "Mice find a way into my apartment no matter what I do. They so small they can fit anywhere." He shrugs. "Supernaturals do come in all sizes."

It gets quiet for a few seconds and we start glancing around.

"The post is only a couple minutes old," says Elsie. "If someone did sneak in, maybe they're still here."

At Elsie's words, there's a squeak and a thump from under one of the beds. Quinton starts toward it, but his movements are still slow and kinda stiff. As good as he might look, it's clear his body hasn't fully recovered from being asleep for so long.

Jayden gets to the bed first, crawling under. "Nothin'."

Elsie drops to the floor too. "There's a hole in the wall!"

Her words remind me of my field training with Agent Magnus, and an idea sparks in my head. "Do flightless fairies live in motels?"

My brother nods. "Any big building, really. Motels, apartments, schools . . ." I see the moment when he understands what I'm really asking.

“There’s a maintenance closet behind the main office. That’ll probably be the main entry point—”

I’m already out the door and racing down the stairwell. I don’t stop until I reach the maintenance closet, which just so happens to be propped open with a broom handle. The light has been left on too.

No sooner do I step inside than a twinkling fairy comes stumbling out of the vent, a cell phone as tall as he is strapped to his back. He looks like a detective from an old movie—dressed in a brown trench coat and a tiny matching fedora. And he appears very pleased with himself.

Until he notices me.

“Ah, crap.” The fairy groans.

“Yeah,” I say. “You’re busted.”



THE FAIRY MAKES A MOVE TO DUCK BACK INTO THE vent, but the weight of his cell phone slows him down. I scoop him up and head back down the hall.

“Unhand me!” he squeaks. “Aren’t you supposed to be the *good* magician? A good person wouldn’t kidnap an innocent fairy!”

“And an innocent fairy wouldn’t be spying on people,” I shoot back.

He crosses his little arms and lets out a *harrumph*.

When I get back to the room, I hold him out for the others to see. “Found our snoop.”

“Columbo?” Quinton shakes his head. “Since when did you start working for a gossip magazine?”

“You know this fairy?” I ask.

My brother nods. “Columbo here used to be a well-respected journalist for the *Discreet Daily News*.”

“Folks don’t want actual news anymore,” says Columbo. “They want gossip—especially gossip that confirms what they already believe. An enterprising fairy like myself goes where the money is.”

Jayden frowns. “Seem like hustlin’ backward to me.”

Columbo grumbles. “All right—you caught me fair and square. At least be decent enough to set me down so we can talk like reasonable adults.”

We all look at my brother—he’s the only other adult here.

“Go on,” says Quinton.

I place Columbo on the table, and the four of us surround him so he can’t try another escape. My brother plucks away his phone. “I’ll hold on to this.”

Now that he’s free of the phone, Columbo pulls off his jacket, revealing a tiny shirt and tie. Shimmering butterfly wings unfold from his back. They make him seem much more pleasant, even while he glares at me.

The fairy begins to pace. “I would first like to say that while I’m sure you all are upset about being professionally snooped upon, I broke no laws. It’s well understood that fairies have special privileges allowing us to use the passageways behind the walls.”

“You mean *flightless* fairies have permission to use those passageways,” I say, recalling my field training. “And that’s only because this is their home too.”

Columbo looks deeply annoyed that I know this. “And when did you get to be such a know-it-all, huh?”

“I’m still an agent,” Quinton cuts in. “I could arrest you for trespassing and unlawful entry. It won’t get you sent to Blackstone Prison or anything, but I’m guessing I can get your known world license suspended. Good luck snooping if you can’t even enter human cities.”

Columbo pales. “H-hey now, we can work something out!”

"I'm listening," says Quinton.

"I heard you guys talking earlier," says Columbo. "You ain't as safe as you might think." He turns to face me and Elsie. "Especially you two."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Elsie asks in a worried voice.

"Let's just say that we at *Rumors & Whisperings* have snoops everywhere, and we tend to know things before the public does. In this case, my info involves you lot. I could be persuaded to trade it for something worthwhile."

"How about getting to keep your known world license?" I ask. "And staying out of jail."

The fairy holds up his hands. "What if I sweeten the pot? I can put a stop to the whole 'Quinton is back' story I teased before. I've got a follow-up post scheduled to go live in one hour that confirms Quinton Peters is awake and hiding out with Amari Peters and Elsie Rodriguez. It's my own blasted fault that I got caught—I was rushing and tagged you in the wrong post!"

"Can you really stop the story?" Elsie asks. "Especially since you've already made it obvious you were talking about Quinton?"

Columbo shrugs. "I'll just tell my boss I got it wrong. That's the thing about gossip. If it turns out to be false, hey, it's only gossip!"

"Okay," says Quinton. "Do that and I'll give you my first exclusive interview once I *do* announce my return. But only if the info you've got is worth it."

The fairy grins. "Oh, it's worth it."

"Fine," says Quinton. "Then we've got a deal."

"Fairy promise?" asks Columbo, his wings shimmering extra bright.

"Fairy promise," my brother agrees.

Columbo takes a bow. "Pleasure doing business with you." He waves us closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Rumor has it our new Prime Minister took over 'cause she didn't want Bane getting the credit for defeating magicians in the coming war. Harlowe wants her name in the history books."

Quinton looks unimpressed. "From what I've heard, Harlowe having a bloated ego isn't all that shocking."

"Then try this on for size," Columbo answers. "Our favorite faun's first official act will be to declare Amari Peters and Elsie Rodriguez as

League sympathizers. Gonna say you two were helping Dylan all along. She's naming you both enemies of the supernatural world."

Quinton falls back into his chair with a thud.

I turn to see Elsie's reaction. She looks as if she's seen a ghost. Jayden, though, seems just as confused as I am.

I swallow and ask, "Is being an enemy of the supernatural world as bad as it sounds?"

"It's the highest crime in our world," Quinton answers. "All the rules go out the window. A worldwide manhunt—agents everywhere will be scouring their cities to find you. They'll even involve the known world authorities. At that point, capturing you is considered worth the risk of possible exposure. Your face will be on the nightly news . . . you'll start showing up on the FBI Most Wanted list. They could even bring Mama in for questioning."

I don't know what to say. I feel so stupid for thinking Harlowe would ever forget about me and Elsie. Dylan's attack might have slowed her down, but no way would she allow the only two people who know the truth about her mind-control ability to remain free. She's coming after us—and she's willing to do whatever it takes to keep us quiet. Even if means charging us with the worst crime in the supernatural world.

Quinton continues. "Harlowe's building a case against us in the court of public opinion, making sure that when we're found, the whole world will think we're traitors. Anything we might say about her using her ability to control the Bureau will seem like a desperate attempt to escape guilt."

Elsie covers her face. "This is horrible."

"That's an understatement," I whisper. "What are we supposed to do now?"

Quinton starts to answer but an alarm begins to wail on his computer, then his phone. Headlights fill the window, and for a split second I wonder if agents are about to storm in.

Columbo uses the distraction to zip past me, disappearing under the bed and back through the hole in the wall.

Jayden makes a move to go after him, but my brother shakes his head.

"I know who it is." Quinton's eyes meet mine. "Mama's here."



IF MAMA CAN SEE HOW SHAKEN WE ARE, SHE DOESN'T show it. The second her eyes land on my brother, she runs to throw her arms around him, laughing and sobbing at once.

“I prayed for this moment every night.” Mama sniffles. “Having you with us again feels like a miracle.”

Quinton takes a deep breath and hugs her back. I’m sure it’s taking him a lot to get past what Columbo just told us, but he’s able to smile. “I’m glad to be back, Mama.”

“What changed?” Mama asks. “How’s it possible you’re awake?”

“Amari made it happen,” Quinton answers. “She never gave up on me.”

I join in the hug too, squeezing them both. With everything there is to worry about right now, being with my family makes me feel safe. Even if deep down, I know I’m not.

Mama lets go first, swiping at her eyes. “Oh my goodness. Jayden and Elsie, I didn’t even see you there.” She begins to laugh but it trails off.

Because my friends both look shell-shocked. Those two aren’t playing it off at all.

“Kids . . .,” Mama begins. “Everything okay?”

“Nah, not really,” says Jayden.

Elsie scrambles, saying, “Don’t mind us. This is a happy moment.”

Confused, Mama turns her attention to me. I try to avoid looking at her, but she lifts my chin until I’m forced to meet her eyes. She searches my face, and her gaze snags on the scratch. “Babygirl, you’re *hurt*?”

My lip quivers and I tell myself that I won’t cry, but the truth is this whole enemy of the supernatural world thing is just one thing too many. Our situation keeps getting worse and I don’t know what to do about it. I feel so powerless.

All that emotion comes bubbling up to the surface and next thing I know I’m bawling like a baby. Everyone looks on, unsure what to do.

Mama seems really worried now. “Somebody please tell me what’s going on?”

It’s Quinton who answers. “Amari and Elsie are in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“The worst kind,” Quinton answers. “It’s a long story but—”

Mama interrupts. “I want every detail. And I want it right now.”

Maybe it’s Mama’s tone, but suddenly my brother seems more like a kid than a twenty-three-year-old. He turns to me. “Maybe it’s best if you tell it?”

I understand why he’s asking. Because this is my story. I’m the only person who’s been there for all of it. So I tell Mama about the past two weeks, from the time freeze to confronting Harlowe to losing the last challenge of the Great Game and my magic. Then I tell her how much trouble we’re in now.

By the end of it, I expect Mama to look as anxious as the rest of us. But she doesn’t. If anything, she looks determined.

“Y’all need to snap out of it, you hear me?” Mama puts her hands on her hips. “You’re acting like you’ve already lost.”

We look at one another. I don’t think any of us expected that reaction.

“Now, I’ll admit,” says Mama, “I’m not as familiar with the supernatural world as a mother with two kids at the Bureau ought to be—it’s all a bit much for me—but even I know that everyone in this room has faced scary situations before. Am I wrong?”

Jayden starts to raise his hand then quickly puts it back down.

Mama continues. “The only way we’re going to come out of this is if we believe we can.” She turns to my brother and asks, “You’ve got a plan for what to do next?”

He nods. “I have a place for us to go. It’s not my first choice—but it’ll work. We’ll need to leave right away. Because once that announcement goes out, we won’t be safe anywhere. And Mama . . . neither will you.”

“Me?” Mama frowns. “What are you saying?”

Quinton explains. “Once Amari’s declared an enemy of the supernatural world, there aren’t any limits to what the Bureau can do to find her. The laws that normally protect known worlders won’t apply anymore. They could come after you to get to Amari.”

Mama tries to keep a brave face, but I see her tremble just a little. “So what should I do?”

“You can come with us,” I say.

But Quinton shakes his head. “It was hard enough to convince the Chamberlains to hide four of us. There’s no chance they’d allow a known worlder in their home.”

“Then what’s Mama supposed to do?” I ask.

But my brother is already moving toward the closet. He comes back with a memory remote.

Panicked, I put myself between him and Mama. “You can’t take her memories!”

“My memories?” Mama whispers.

“He’s going to take your memories of us,” I say. “So even if you get captured you won’t be able to tell them anything useful. Because you won’t even know who we are.”

Mama just blinks. Quinton’s silence confirms I’m right.

“It doesn’t have to be permanent,” says Elsie.

I glare at her. “Stay out of it!”

“Sorry.” Lowering her eyes, Elsie steps behind Jayden.

“Elsie’s right,” says Quinton. “The effects of a memory remote can always be reversed. When all this is over, returning Mama’s memories will be the first thing we do.”

“And if something happens to us,” I begin. “What then? She’ll live out the rest of her life not knowing we ever existed.”

Quinton just shakes his head. “I promise you, Chicken Little. I don’t like this any more than you do. But I don’t see what other choice we have.”

“I don’t care,” I tell him, crossing my arms. “I won’t let you.”

Mama speaks in a low voice. “It’s not your choice to make, Babygirl.”

I whirl on her. “You agree with him?”

“I agree with whatever will keep my babies safe—no matter the cost.” Mama reaches up to wipe the tears from my face. “Maybe you can’t understand this decision right now but, Lord willing, one day you may be holding your own child in your arms. And I promise it’ll all make sense.”

What am I supposed to say to that? I can tell from her expression that her mind is made up, so I settle for an angry “Fine, do whatever you want.”

Mama takes my hand. “Don’t be upset with me—or your brother. You two are going to need one another to get through this. This is my choice; no one’s making me do it.”

“I don’t like this,” I say. “I hate it.”

Mama puts an arm around me and waves the others closer. “Come here. All of you.”

We gather around and Mama looks each of us in the eyes. “I’m counting on you four to look out for one another, okay? The last thing I want is to get my memories back and learn something terrible has happened to one of you. Now I want to hear each of you promise to meet me on the other side.”

“I promise,” I say.

Quinton follows. “It’s a promise, Mama.”

“Elsie, Jayden,” Mama says, “let’s hear it.”

Elsie nods rapidly. “I’ll be there.”

Jayden grins. “You can count on me, Mrs. P.”

“Good.” Mama takes a deep breath. “Quinton, do what you need to do.”

Quinton taps a few buttons on the memory remote, and music starts playing. Aiming the remote at Mama, he presses a bright red button, and

we watch her eyelids begin to droop as though she's falling asleep.

"Renee Peters?" says Quinton.

"Yes," she answers dreamily.

"You've got the sudden urge to see your childhood friend Grace, the one who's always inviting you to visit her farm out in the country."

"Poor thing invites me every year knowing I won't come."

"Y-you . . .," Quinton stutters, his eyes flitting to me for a moment. "You never had any kids, and if someone asks you about Quinton or Amari, you'll just change the subject. Same goes for Elsie and Jayden."

Mama nods, her eyes still shut. "Any of those names come up, I'll just change the subject."

"Wake up," says Quinton.

Mama's eyes flutter open, and she stares at the four of us, confused. "I don't know who you kids are or why we're here, but I really need to see an old friend. She's always going on about her goats and chickens, and I reckon it's time I see what all the fuss is about."

She gets to her feet and heads for the door.

"Mama?" I say before I can stop myself.

She pauses, smiling at me. But it's not an Amari smile. Not a *Babygirl* smile. Her warmth is missing. That look that says *I'm yours and you're mine*.

Mama finally says to me, "I don't know who your mother is, sweetheart, but I do hope you find her." And then she walks out the door.

"I'll see you soon," I whisper, watching through the motel window as Mama climbs into her car.

This war has only just begun and already it's cost me so much. Losing Mama is just one more thing on a long list.

I ball my fists at my sides. I'm going to make things right, no matter what it takes.

Everything depends on it.



WHEN IT'S TIME FOR BED, I CAN'T SLEEP. NOT SURE IF it's because of everything that's going on or the glow from Quinton's laptop as he monitors the surveillance cameras overnight. Maybe it's Elsie's muffled snores on the double bed we share.

Whatever the reason, it's annoying. But I close my eyes and try again anyway.

My thoughts go back to the final challenge of the Great Game, where I proved once and for all that my magic was stronger than Dylan's. I commanded the skies, swirling winds and roiling black clouds. Bright flashes of lightning answered my call. I had the Great Game pretty much

won, but Cozmo—the steward of the League of Magicians—had other plans.

He demanded I hand over one of my Victor's Rings to Dylan and threatened to hurt Elsie if I refused. How could I not save my best friend?

By getting a third ring, Dylan won the Great Game. He received the Crown of Vladimir as the prize, and he also got to take all but a drop of *my* magic as his own. Without it, there's this hollow feeling inside me that never completely goes away. Like part of me is missing.

I reach beneath my pillow for the one Victor's Ring I've got left. The thin band of silver is cool to the touch, and a hum of power, though faint, sends a satisfying jolt through my body. For a moment, it reminds me of what it felt like to have my magic. Elsie seems to think there might be enough left inside the ring to cast one last spell, but who knows.

When the sensation fades, I'm back to feeling powerless. Things were hard enough *with* magic; without it, I can't help wondering if I'll just be in the way.

I shake off my worries before I drown in them. There's gotta be something I can do. I have to believe that. And now's as good a time as any to take Elsie's advice and talk to my brother about treating me like an actual partner. No more being left behind.

I start to sit up, but a sudden wave of dizziness sends my head spinning. It's just like before in the bathroom when I heard Dylan's voice. Except this time my eyelids grow super heavy.

Desperate, I try to speak, to let Quinton know something is happening to me. My brother's right there on the other side of the room, but my mouth won't work and neither do my arms and legs.

A wave of drowsiness washes over me and my body goes limp. I feel myself drifting off . . .

And suddenly I'm standing on a stone balcony overlooking a vast forest. Stars twinkle overhead and the moon shimmers. A cool breeze tickles my nose.

I go still. *Where am I? And how did I get here?*

There's a commotion behind me and I whip my head around to find a sea of bright red cloaks. Men and women huddle in groups, whispering.

Those are League of Magicians cloaks! There's one draped around my shoulders as well. If the League is here, then Dylan must be too. The last time we saw each other he tried to bury me in flames.

Panicking, I pull the hood of my cloak tight over my curly fro. My hair doesn't allow my cloak to hide me as well as I'd like, so I keep my head low and speed-walk toward the nearest doorway. I need to get myself out of sight. Once I'm no longer out in the open, I'll figure out what's going on.

Keeping my eyes on the floor, I make it all of ten steps before bumping into someone—hard enough to knock me off my feet and onto the cold stone floor.

It takes a few seconds for the surprise to wear off. When it does, I clutch my throbbing shoulder and wince. But that's the least of my worries as my terror swells. *How many people saw me fall? What if someone recognizes me?*

Before I can pick myself back up, a boy with messy brown hair kneels in front of me. He's a little older than I am, and his bright green eyes go wide when we lock eyes.

"You shouldn't be here, Amari Peters," he whispers, glancing over his shoulders. "It's not safe."

I flinch at the sound of my name. I'm tempted to run, but there's real concern in this boy's expression. It makes me pause. He could've alerted everyone in the room the moment he recognized me, but he hasn't. Maybe I can trust him.

"I don't even know where *here* is," I say quickly. "What's happening?"

He frowns. "No time to explain. Take this." He pulls off his cloak and drapes it over my own. Because he's taller than I am, it practically swallows me—a good thing, because the oversized hood allows me to better hide my face.

"Lucas, quit playing on the floor!" snaps a raspy voice. "I'll not have my apprentice embarrassing me before the entire League."

"Coming, Master," the boy answers, before turning his eyes back to me. "Whatever you do, stay out of sight—okay? You've still got friends here, but we're not many. Find me after."

I nod and watch him turn and disappear into the crowd.

Worry prickles my skin as I get back on my feet. But a peek from under my new hood reveals that no one is watching me at all. Everyone seems too anxious to pay me any attention. As I move through the crowd my ears catch pieces of conversations. I'm fearful but also curious about what's going on.

“Van Helsing wasted no time in summoning us . . .”

“Haven’t met like this in centuries . . .”

“I get that he’s angry. But what did he mean by punishment?”

My breath hitches. They must’ve heard the same thing I did in the bathroom earlier. Which means I didn’t have a panic attack at all. That really was Dylan’s voice.

But how did I get here? And why would Dylan include me in a message to the League? It doesn’t make any sense. Unless I’m still technically a member even without my magic?

“Come forth!” someone shouts. It’s Cozmo. “And swear loyalty to the champion of the Great Game—and your newly crowned leader.”

The chatter grows louder as the magicians begin to shuffle toward the opposite side of the room, passing through towering arched doors.

I keep close but stay at the back so I won’t be noticed. When I spot an especially tall magician with broad shoulders, I follow him through the door and over to a staircase.

Once I’m up the stairs, I realize where I am. It’s the League meeting grounds, and I’m on one of the balconies overlooking the throne.

I remember standing on the throne room floor, staring up at a sea of magicians in red cloaks. Maria and I had come seeking the League’s help, only for me to be forced to enter the Great Game.

The massive black Midnight Throne sat empty then, but tonight Dylan Van Helsing is sprawled across it, his legs hanging over the side. The Crown of Vladimir glows darkly on his head, dimming the colors of everything around him. Now that he’s got my magic, and the Crown’s magic too, that boy is the most powerful magician to ever live.

Even up here on the balcony, I can feel the power radiating off him, raising the hairs on my neck and making me ache for what I’ve lost. Again, I think about how close I came to winning the Great Game and standing where he is now.

Dylan looks up, his unnaturally red pupils scanning the crowd. He looks unimpressed. When his gaze reaches my balcony, I retreat out of view until it’s safe again, my heart thundering in my chest.

Cozmo clears his throat. “Allow me to formally introduce—”

“Shut up,” says Dylan, getting to his feet. “Everyone already knows who I am.”

Cozmo reacts with a strained smile. He bows before sitting in the much smaller steward's chair to the right of the throne.

Dylan begins to clap. "Allow me to congratulate you all on failing magiciankind so spectacularly these last seven hundred years." He glances to Cozmo. "Some of you have been around since the beginning."

Cozmo reddens, and harsh whispers fill the air. I hear a lady mutter under her breath, "Arrogant little brat, isn't he?"

Dylan continues. "For centuries you've watched, doing nothing, while Moreau and his apprentices were hopelessly outnumbered against the Bureau. You clung to your fair magic, congratulating yourselves on what good people you were . . . all while hiding in the shadows like roaches as magicians were cursed, and UnWanted—our own creations—were treated like second-class citizens."

I risk a look at the faces across the balcony. For as many angry stares that rain down on Dylan, there are also lots of magicians nodding along.

"Moreau was a monster," someone shouts.

Murmurs of assent follow.

"He was a hero!" someone shouts back.

"If you think he's so great, then why did you steal his magic?" calls another.

More cries go up, but Dylan's voice drowns them out. "I took Moreau's magic because he was weak, but at least the old man had the courage to fight for magiciankind." He throws up his hands. "The supernatural world hates us—according to them, we shouldn't even exist. We are the most magical beings on the planet. We are living marvels, doers of the impossible, and yet we can't even show our faces?"

The room is silent as Dylan casts his gaze over the balconies. "Harlowe kidnapped dozens of us and still you choose to cower," he continues. "You don't deserve the magic you wield. So I'll be taking it back."

Gasps ring out, but Dylan just smiles. "Starting with the failed leadership of the past." He takes off the Crown and points it at the League steward. "With this, I control the magic of the entire League. And I demand all but a drop of your magic."

Cozmo barely has time to protest before streaks of silver light pour out of him and into the Crown. He growls and attempts to charge Dylan but only manages to stumble out of his steward's chair onto his knees. His

hands clutch at his chest, shoulders heaving. “Please,” he cries. “I pulled you from the Sightless Depths . . . ensured you won the Great Game.”

“It’s the only reason I didn’t take *all* your magic,” Dylan answers. “Be grateful I’ve spared your life.”

I shudder. I’ve experienced losing that much magic at once. It feels like a punch in the gut.

Dylan looks up to the hushed balconies and raises the Crown over his head. “What’s wrong? No more boos? Nothing else to shout about? Look at yourselves, terrified you’ll be next to lose your precious magic. Where is your backbone? Aren’t you tired of being afraid? Had Cozmo not led you to revere fair magick and instead followed the Night Brothers down the Foul Path, you’d know this already—the only cure for fear is power, and power is best sustained through fear.”

Out of the quiet, some magicians begin to applaud. Others watch in disgust.

Dylan shakes the Crown with one hand, while pointing to Cozmo’s hunched body with the other. “Only those willing to earn their magic—to fight for it—will continue to have the privilege.”

A cheer rises across the balconies. It sends a chill down my spine.

Dylan looks pleased with himself. But then his expression darkens. “We will get back every magician who was stolen from us. And then we will retaliate so harshly that no one will ever think to cross us again. From now on, we do not hide—we strike down anyone who dares stand against us. Some of you will think us monsters for it, but sometimes a monster is what’s required.”

Dylan steps forward and extends a hand. A flash of swirling blue light appears. “Behold, true power. The supernatural world will kneel, or it will die.”

This time raucous cheers fill the balcony, even as some magicians back away, terrified. Those who remain pump their fists and chant Dylan’s name again and again.

I’m so struck by the sight that I forget to move when the tall magician I’ve been using for cover turns to leave, appalled.

Dylan squints as his wandering gaze snags on mine. “I think we have a spy.” A gust of wind—my magic—carries him upward.

I turn to run but other magicians move to block my path, closing ranks around me until I’ve got nowhere to go.

“Hello, Amari.” Dylan grins, landing on the balcony a few steps in front of me. “When I summoned all League members, I didn’t realize that still included you.”

“Stay back,” I shout. “Or else.” But it’s an empty threat. I’ve got no magic. I glance at the unfamiliar faces around me. Even though that Lucas kid said I have friends here, no one steps forward to help me.

“Or else what?” Dylan steps forward and grabs me by the arm, his fingers digging painfully into my skin—

And I wake with a start, chest heaving, to find Elsie staring down at me.

“S-sorry,” she stutters. “Quinton said to wake you.”

It takes me a few seconds to realize I’m in the motel room. And that I’m safe. It was just a dream, I tell myself.

“Get packed,” Quinton calls, snapping me out of my daze. “We need to move. My contact at the Bureau let me know this motel just popped up as a place of interest at the Department of Supernatural Investigations. Seems a certain fairy in a trench coat sold us out.”

I nod to my brother and nudge Elsie. “Can I tell you something later? Something important?”

“Sure,” she says. “Is everything okay?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

The four of us pile into an Uber wearing the barest of disguises. I’m talking hats and baseball caps pulled low—or, in my case, tying my hair down in a bun and putting on some oversized shades. It’s the best we can do with what we’ve got.

I figured we’d be teleporting to our new hideout, but Quinton is being super strict after learning about the whole enemy of the supernatural world thing. Because there aren’t any restrictions on what the Bureau can do to find us, they can start intercepting teleports from any transporter issued to anyone ever associated with me or Elsie. Meaning we could think we’re heading someplace safe, only to reappear inside a cell in Blackstone Prison. So we’ll only teleport as a last resort.

The drive across the city to Chamberlain Manor is long even without traffic, and we’ve got the bad luck to be stuck in the morning rush. Quinton sits up front, while me, Elsie, and Jayden are squeezed into the back seat.

“Any Braves fans in the car today?” Our driver is a young white guy, a college student maybe. He’s got on a blue baseball jersey and there’s a

World Series Champions 2021 pendant hanging from the rearview mirror.

“Absolutely!” Quinton answers. As he spends the beginning of the ride pretending to care about the Atlanta Braves as much as our driver does, the rest of us stay quiet.

But that doesn’t mean there aren’t a million thoughts racing through my head. I’m still trying to process everything that happened in that dream. That Lucas kid who gave me his cloak, Cozmo losing his magic, Dylan’s threats . . . And that strange blue light he created, what was that about?

I remember feeling so scared. But then I woke up.

It’s not like I was inside a dreaming theater, or even wearing Wakeful Dream shades. Meaning Elsie’s gotta be right—this stuff with Dylan is just in my head. A panic attack followed by a bad nightmare.

So why does it feel like more?

Elsie nudges me with her elbow. “Is it later enough?”

“Huh?” I say.

“To talk about whatever you wanted to discuss back at the motel?”

I glance at my brother in the front seat. As much as I want to get Elsie’s thoughts, I don’t want Quinton to overhear me and assume I’m cracking under the pressure of everything that’s going on.

So I tell Elsie, “Let’s talk when it’s just us.”

My best friend sighs. As much as I hate to disappoint her, it’s for the best. Still, there is something weighing on my conscience. Elsie’s always got my back no matter what. I need to apologize for giving her such a dirty look back at the motel. Truth is, I really did forget that the effect of memory remotes can be reversed—it’s only permanent if you want it to be. I was just so caught up in my own feelings.

Elsie gives my hand a squeeze. When I meet her eyes, the corner of her mouth quirks up.

“No need to apologize,” she says. “Your aura is already shimmering white.”

I smile a little too. “I’m surprised it’s not a bright yellow.”

“There’s definitely some yellow around the edges,” Elsie replies. “But you’re braver than you think.”

“What about your mom?” I ask. “Aren’t you worried about her?”

“Just before things got hectic she accepted a month-long undersea expedition,” says Elsie. “The Atlantians think they might have discovered a

new species of sea dragon in an uncharted region of the Mariana Trench. Hopefully we'll get rid of Harlowe before the expedition ends."

I nod. I almost ask Jayden the same question, but I already know he and his mom don't have the best relationship. That lady is always leaving him to fend for himself.

Jayden turns from the window to look at us, his voice low. "Don't it seem like there's a *lot* of supernaturals on the road?"

I glance at the cars around us on the interstate. He's right. There's a whole family of yetis packed into the huge SUV on our left, and the ocean nymph on the motorcycle to our right has a biker helmet filled with seawater and a duffel bag strapped down tight. When our driver changes lanes, we end up behind a large station wagon filled with luggage. The bumper sticker on the back reads:

**MY OTHER RIDE IS A SPACESHIP.
NO, SERIOUSLY ☐**

"Everyone's leaving," Elsie whispers. "I bet it's the same in every Bureau city. London, Sydney, Cairo—nobody wants to be caught in the crossfire between the League and the Bureau."

If we weren't convinced before, Elsie's suspicions become undeniable once the car pulls off the interstate and we head through downtown Atlanta. So many of the supernatural businesses I know have *Closed* signs on the doors. Even Marco's Mini-Mart, the convenience store/dessert spot near me and Elsie's private school, has its doors and windows boarded up. Whole streets and neighborhoods look like ghost towns.

Atlanta has never felt more ominous.

"What's this guy's problem?" shouts our driver. "He's driving like a maniac!"

We all turn to look out the back window. A black SUV is tailing us so close that I can clearly see the gray uniforms of the agents in the front seat. My heart drops into my belly.

The Bureau has found us.



FLASHING BLUE LIGHTS COME TO LIFE ON THE ROOF OF the suv and a siren wails. “*STOP THE VEHICLE,*” booms the loudspeaker.

“Do *not* follow that order,” says Quinton, eyeing the SUV in the side mirror. “Those aren’t police.”

Our driver starts shaking his head. “I don’t know, man—they look like police to me.”

“Just trust me.” Quinton digs into his bag for his laptop. “This is an electric car, correct?”

“Uh, yeah,” the driver replies. “But what’s that got to do with anything?”

Quinton ignores the question and flips open his computer. “And it has self-driving capabilities?”

“Bro, before I answer . . . ,” our driver begins, hands trembling on the steering wheel. “I need you to be straight with me. What’s going on?”

“It’s really important that you answer *my* question,” says Quinton. “Does this car have self-driving technology or not?”

The driver hesitates but finally nods.

“That’s what I thought,” says Quinton. “Listen up, I’m about to take control of your car from my laptop. But the only reason I’m doing so is to prevent the folks in that truck behind us from doing it first.” He taps a few buttons on the keyboard. “You can let go of the wheel now.”

Our driver leans back in his seat, slowly removing one hand, then the other. “*Whoa!*” For a moment, he stares open-mouthed at the steering wheel before turning to face my brother. “This is some high-tech spy stuff, man. You some kinda *Mission Impossible* secret agent or something?”

“Something like that,” Quinton mutters, continuing to type.

“Aye—” is all Jayden manages to shout before a second SUV skids to a stop up ahead, blocking one side of the street.

Quinton reacts fast, reaching over to yank hard on the wheel so we narrowly avoid crashing into the second SUV. The movement is so sudden my body lifts off the seat before I land on Elsie.

“Ow!” she groans.

I don’t get the chance to apologize because Quinton’s laptop comes bouncing into the back seat straight for me. Jayden bats the thing down before it smacks me in the face.

I dive for the laptop, praying that we aren’t about to go crashing into the side of a building. But the computer has slid under the front seat and I can barely reach it.

Our driver whimpers. “There’s three of ’em now!”

My heart pounds. I stretch my arm beneath the front seat as far as I can until I’m able to grab the laptop and pull it to me. But by the time I’m

back in my seat and ready to hand it to my brother, he's half leaning out the window, adjusting his Stun Stick to fire a bright red blast that strikes one of the SUVs.

The truck slows, and its flashing lights go dark. But the other two remain in hot pursuit.

"It'll be a minute before my Stun Stick recharges for another EMP shot," shouts Quinton. "Open the laptop and make sure we're still on course."

No wonder we lost that first SUV. An EMP is a pulse of energy that creates a powerful electromagnetic field capable of short-circuiting electronics. Including the Bureau's electric SUVs.

I do what my brother says and look at the screen. The app he's got open shows our car moving along the city streets.

**En route to 1618 Lexington Ave
40 MPH
Will Reach Destination in Approximately
5 Minutes**

I read it off to Quinton and he shouts back, "Good. You're going to have to steer, okay? It's easier than it sounds. If you see a right turn approaching just press the right arrow key and the car will obey."

"They gaining on us," Jayden warns.

"Up the speed!" Quinton calls, leaning out the window again. "Use the top arrow key!"

This time it's me who hesitates. We're already moving so fast.

Boom! The entire car rattles as one of the SUVs slams into the back of our car.

I smash the up arrow until the screen shows 45 MPH and then 50 MPH.

Our turn comes so I press the right arrow, and the car takes the corner so quick two wheels come off the ground. Half freaking out myself, I glance over at our driver and find him covering his eyes with both hands.

"PULL OVER NOW!" A woman's voice blares over the loudspeaker. The black SUVs are farther behind now. But not for long. They speed up, closing in again as we zip through mostly empty back streets.

Quinton fires another EMP shot but this time the drivers are watching for it and easily steer around the blast.

“We need to get some more distance between us,” my brother says, settling back into his seat.

This time I’m on it. I dial the speed up to 55 miles per hour, but as I do we hit a pothole too fast and I end up pressing the button for too long. The thing jumps up to 65 and we race through a busy intersection, every one of us screaming our lungs out.

The next turn is coming so I tap the down arrow to slow us a bit. I press the left key and the car whips into an alley, wheels screeching beneath us as we head straight for a concrete wall.

“Slow down!” screams Elsie.

“I’m trying!” I smash the down button as fast as I’m able. But there’s just not enough time.

“No,” calls Quinton. “Keep going!”

“What do you mean *keep going*?” I shout back.

“Trust me!”

I glance from the computer to the fast-approaching wall, then back to the computer. Every part of me wants to hit the down key, but I stop myself. Because this is Quinton, and there’s no one I trust more in the world.

So I close the laptop, and then my eyes. And let us crash into the side of a building.

Except we don’t. At least, I don’t feel us crash.

When the screaming stops and I’m brave enough to open my eyes, I find the car covered in golden thread. It’s so thin you can’t even see it except in the places where it bunches up. Those threads must be what stopped us—like being caught by a golden net.

I sit up and look around. It seems like we’re in some kinda garage or something? All the walls are concrete, and there are stalls with supernatural vehicles hoisted in the air above mechanical equipment. There’s a dented flying saucer, a barely smoldering chariot of fire, and even a pumpkin carriage with a giant bite mark. They’ve all seen better days.

Quinton turns to look at us in the back seat, a wide grin on his face. “Everybody in one piece? Wasn’t sure this place would still be here, but, man, am I glad it is.”

“No offense,” I say, breathing hard. “But if we survive the summer, I am seriously retiring from this whole saving the world thing.”

“Me too,” says Elsie. “Not nearly as fun as it looks in the movies.”

A squeak from the driver's seat reminds us that we didn't come alone. "Is it over?" asks our driver. "Am I in the afterlife?"

"You're very much alive," says Quinton, giving him a pat on the shoulder. "You may not realize it, but your actions helped protect our world from some really nasty threats."

Our driver turns to look at Quinton, a bit of the color returning to his cheeks. "So you really *are* a secret agent dude."

A knock comes, and Quinton turns to let down his window. A knife cuts through the golden threads and an old guy with long gray hair leans in. He's got only one beady eye, which glances curiously around the car.

Our driver faints.

"As I live and breathe!" laughs the cyclops. "If it ain't Quinton Peters back from eternal slumber. If I'd realized you were traveling with a known worlder I'd have worn my extra eye."

"Ah, he'll be fine—I'm just glad to see the shop's still open," Quinton answers. "And I'm even more grateful the emergency entrance is still in place. Still catering to clients of a less than reputable nature? Supernaturals who need to make a quick getaway?"

No wonder there's a false wall with a net set up behind it. If you've committed a crime, this is the perfect place to escape, especially if you're being chased.

The cyclops's grin turns sheepish. "I gave up the criminal life ages ago. Just forgot to take down the net is all."

Now Quinton is grinning too. "It's no concern of mine. I'm here as a customer, not a Special Agent. We need a glamour placed on the car. Something that'll fool even folks from the Bureau. I'm talking True-Sight-proof glammers."

The cyclops steps back, looking confused. "Everyone knows True Sight is foolproof. And even if it could be fooled, a glamour like that would be against the law. I already told you I've—"

"Oh, drop the act," says Quinton. "It only makes sense you'd keep a few illegal modifications locked away in case your old clients need your services. That's the real reason the net is still up, am I right?"

The cyclops huffs out a sigh. "Follow me to the back."



OUR FRIEND MR. CYCLOPS PLACES TINY HOLOGRAPHIC lights all over the car that project the image of an ambulance around us. To anyone looking from the outside, we'll seem like we're racing to respond to an urgent call.

There's even a special box on the hood that wails like a siren to make the glamour more convincing.

And it works! A drive that would've taken another forty-five minutes is cut in half as cars pull over to let us by. Being able to blow through a few red lights helps too.

When we finally arrive at the iron gates of our new hideout, we leave our driver in the parking lot with some brand-new memories. He'll have no idea he ever met a cyclops or got chased through the streets of Atlanta. But that doesn't mean we aren't thankful—Quinton leaves a note promising him Braves season tickets. He just won't remember why he's getting them.

The sign at the front entrance says that Chamberlain Manor is a registered historical landmark and there are guided tours during the week. We grab our backpacks and head to the ticket booth. The guy inside offers to let us catch up with the tour that just left so we won't feel lost in the larger tourist group booked for 10:30, but we decline. Getting lost in a crowd is exactly what we want.

When a bus full of Norwegian tourists arrives, we file in behind them, careful to stay out of the photos they're taking. An energetic tour guide quickly introduces herself and waves us through the tall black gates.

The group moves along a paved walkway that cuts through a thickly wooded area until we reach a small clearing and get our first look at the massive nineteenth-century mansion. It almost looks like two different homes set side by side—one half looks like a castle where a fairy-tale prince might live, but the other is faded with blackened walls. If the prince had an evil twin brother, that's the side he'd choose.

The tour guide speaks into her microphone. "Chamberlain Manor was built in 1885 by wealthy shipping magnate Cecil Chamberlain and was once the largest home in the country. Sadly, it would only be in use for five short years before a fire tragically claimed the lives of all four members of the Chamberlain family. The home was willed to the City of Atlanta and the proceeds from tours and events fund various charitable endeavors across the city—but more on that later. Before making our way to the house, we'll be visiting the gardens just up ahead . . ."

I do a double take as I notice the green-eyed kid from my dream on the other side of our tourist group. The boy looks nervous, and he's waving me closer.

How is he here? And why?

I start toward him, watching his eyes shift to look at something over my shoulder.

And then he's gone. Except I never took my eyes off him—I didn't even blink. Frantic, I search the crowd but it's like he vanished into thin air.

"Guys," Quinton calls, hanging back from the tour group. He points into the trees. "This way."

I give one more look over my shoulder and shake my head. Did I just imagine that? It's one thing to dream wild things, but to start seeing them when I'm awake too? At this point, I don't know what to think.

My friends and I follow Quinton into the woods, where gnarled roots have grown over a narrow trail leading to an abandoned barn next to a small creek.

We hop the creek and climb a hill to a low fence on the burned side of the house. I don't realize until we've already slipped through the fence that it surrounds a small cemetery. Creepy. But we continue until we come up to two large wooden doors on the house's far side.

Quinton gives a single knock, and the doors immediately swing open.

All four of us freeze. I'm not sure what I was expecting to see, but it certainly wasn't Frankenstein's monster, ten feet tall and snarling at us. He's a dark shade of red, his skin covered in loose stitches. He's also got giant metal bolts coming out of his ears and neck.

"Uh, hello, Mr. Chamberlain." Quinton takes a cautious step forward. "Any chance your wife is around?"

My friends and I look at one another. *That's* Mr. Chamberlain?

The guy grumbles, "None of you are welcome here. Now go away and don't come back—"

"Quinton, darling!" coos a voice. A lady in a sparkling silver gown rushes down a wide staircase, her arms outstretched. "Please ignore my brute of a husband. Come in, come in!"

Quinton steps through the doorway, making sure to keep his distance from Mr. Chamberlain.

Mrs. Chamberlain makes an elaborate curtsy and Quinton bows in return.

"Always great to see the Peach of Atlanta," he says with a smile.

"Still such a charmer!" says Mrs. Chamberlain, playfully swatting him. "It's been well over a century since anyone's called me that! But enough about me. It's my great honor to welcome you into my home. We're

forever in your debt for bringing our son home after that horrible Drowned Dame stole him away. Honestly, to be that upset because my Halloween party outclassed her sunken snoozefest!”

Quinton laughs. “Always happy to help.”

“So tell me,” adds Mrs. Chamberlain. “Have you and Maria finally come to your senses and proclaimed your undying affection for each other? I do love a celebrity wedding.”

My brother blushes hard. “Maria and I are just coworkers and friends.”

“But that’s so *boring*.” Mrs. Chamberlain sighs. “Honestly, love is wasted on the living.”

She frowns and lifts her foot to remove one of her sparkling silver heels, hurling it at Mr. Chamberlain. The thing whizzes harmlessly past his head, but it’s enough to get the monster to turn around.

“Would you stop that incessant growling?” Mrs. Chamberlain complains. “You’re scaring the guests. Go make yourself useful—fetch our son so he can show our visitors to their rooms.”

Mr. Chamberlain sulks off, grumbling, and Mrs. Chamberlain turns her attention to me and my friends just outside the door. “Come in, I promise we don’t bite.” She grins wickedly. “At least not during the day.”

I swallow and head inside. There’s the faint smell of smoke in the air. I follow my nose back to our host, Mrs. Chamberlain. She’s on fire—as in there are actual flames burning along the pale skin of her arms. Which would *really* freak me out if I didn’t know she’s already dead.

She must be a ghoul. They keep their human bodies even after death, but there’s a downside—if they died in some awful way, you can always tell.

“That don’t hurt?” Jayden asks.

“Does what hurt, dear?” answers Mrs. Chamberlain.

Jayden points. “All them flames.”

“Not anymore.” Mrs. Chamberlain winks at him, and with a clap of her hands the large wooden doors slam shut behind us. “It appears as though I’ll be giving you the grand tour myself. My son seems to have more important things to do than obey his mother.”

“I’m here!” shouts a high-pitched voice.

I look around for the source until a shimmering ghost of a boy pops into existence inches from my face.

“Boo!” the ghost shouts.

I jump, covering a scream.

“Peek-a-Boo!” scolds Mrs. Chamberlain. “You’re just as rude as your father.”

Peek-a-Boo puffs out his chest and grins. “Really? Do you mean it?”

Mrs. Chamberlain sighs. “What on earth am I going to do with you? Take the girls up to the attic. I’ll show the boys to the basement. And no pranks!”

I don’t like the idea of separating. Quinton must read it on my face because he says, “It’ll be fine. We’ll get settled and then meet up in a bit to discuss what comes next.”

“Okay,” I say, putting on a brave face. On the bright side, I’ll get to talk to Elsie alone about Dylan and my dream, and if she noticed that green-eyed boy back with the tour group too. It’s all really messing with my head.

Peek-a-Boo howls like a wolf and zips up the stairs. “Catch me if you can!” he hollers, his voice echoing.

Elsie frowns. “It’s like Mischief the Elevator died and became a ghost.”

“You guys coming or what?” Peek-a-Boo shouts down.

Me and Elsie sprint up the staircase and step into a wide hallway. I’m looking up at a frowning portrait on the wall when I feel something jerk beneath my foot. I slowly lift my shoe, certain I’ve stepped on something, only to have the floorboard fall away into a shadowy void.

I leap up onto a side table. “What the heck is going on with the floor?”

Peek-a-Boo shrugs. “Haven’t you seen a gateway to nothingness before?”

“Like a black hole?” Elsie asks. “You’re saying there’s a random black hole beneath the floorboards?”

“That’s hardly the scariest thing you’ll find here,” says Peek-a-Boo. “Didn’t Mother warn you? Chamberlain Manor has been designated a House of Horrors.”

My jaw drops. That certainly wasn’t on the brochure. No wonder this place wasn’t Quinton’s first choice for a safe house. “You live in an actual House of Horrors?”

“You two sure like repeating stuff!” Peek-a-Boo hoots with laughter. “Follow me.” He floats down the hallway while my best friend and I carefully step around the newly made hole in the floor.

“Did you know about this?” I ask Elsie.

“I had no idea!” she whispers back. “But it *was* smart of Quinton to pick this place—no humans can come to this side of the house, as it’s the off-limits portion of the historical landmark. And a House of Horrors Certificate—aka a twenty-four/seven Permit to Terrorize from the Bureau—is awarded only to the most haunted houses. Even the bravest supernaturals would steer clear of this place.”

Elsie’s right. A House of Horrors attracts the spookiest beings and unnatural phenomena in the whole supernatural world. Those kinds of creatures are drawn to places like this precisely because there’s no limit to what they can do. They can terrorize all day, every day, in whatever manner they see fit.

I shake my head. “I don’t care how great a hideout this might be, I’m not sleeping in a place that’s out to get me!”

“Actually, the attic and basement are considered safe zones,” says Peek-a-Boo, reappearing out of thin air. “It’s only when moving through the rest of the house that you’ll need to be careful.”

“You mean like right now?” I look at Elsie, who has the nerve to be laughing. “What’s so funny?”

My best friend laughs harder. “Since when did I become the brave one?” But her grin fades as something starts to claw behind the nearest wall. She scoots closer to Peek-a-Boo. “Maybe we should get going?”

Peek-a-Boo takes us into the next hallway then stops at a dusty bedroom—it’s an enormous space with a giant four-poster bed. And it’s full of fancy dollhouses, almost like a miniature city.

“This used to be my sister Boo-Hoo’s room.” Peek-a-Boo’s glow dims a bit. “Unlike the rest of the family, she didn’t choose to remain in the realm of the living.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” says Elsie. “You never know, she could always apply for ghosthood in the future.”

“Maybe.” Peek-a-Boo looks down. “She was my favorite.”

“What about your dad?” I ask, trying to lighten the subject. “How did he end up with screws in his neck?”

Peek-a-Boo brightens. “Father paid some low-rent scientist a fortune to bring him back to life if he was ever declared dead. Of course it didn’t work, but that doesn’t stop Mother from being eternally annoyed that Father paid only for himself and not her too!”

It's not until we turn the corner that I start to hear skittering sounds. I peep back around and catch sight of an army of mangled dolls pouring out of the bedroom. They move herky-jerky style, like little zombies.

My heart leaps into my throat and I turn Elsie around to see them too. She shrieks and we dash into the next room, where Peek-a-Boo floats through the wall to join us. "That was totally awesome! I thought you might've been goners but you're faster than you look! The attic is just up the next staircase."

We don't wait for Peek-a-Boo. We exchange a look and dash up the stairs to find a ladder leading into the ceiling. That's gotta be where we're headed.

I enter the attic expecting the worst. Peek-a-Boo claims this place is a safe zone, but I don't think Elsie or I trust this house one bit.

Thankfully all that's up here are a couple sleeping bags and a broken TV.

Peek-a-Boo comes up through the floor. "The specter I just passed on the stairs says Prime Minister Harlowe is about to speak. Turn on the television."

My eyes go to the battered little TV in the corner. It's one of those super-old box sets. The screen is cracked.

"That thing?" I say. "It looks like it fell off a truck."

Elsie nods. "Like it fell off a truck and then got run over by a second, even bigger truck."

Peek-a-Boo groans. "You living don't know anything, do you? Only broken TVs can connect to Die-Fi."

"Die-Fi?" I ask.

Elsie's eyes go wide. "I've heard of that technology! It's great for places with no electricity. It works like Wi-Fi except it only connects to dead electronics. Where in the world did you get it?"

"Mother got it in a gift bag," says Peek-a-Boo. "Perks of being a cast member on *Real Housewives from Beyond the Grave*."

"How does it work?" As interesting as haunted house Wi-Fi is, we've got more important stuff to worry about. "I want to hear what Harlowe has to say."

Peek-a-Boo shrugs. "Same as anything else. Just press the power button."

“Oh.” I press the button and a ghostly image flickers in front of the TV as if it’s coming from an otherworldly film projector.

The screen cuts to a face we all recognize. Elaine Harlowe. The faun stands before a podium looking smug. The largest name tag I’ve ever seen is stamped across her chest, *PRIME MINISTER* written in all caps.

Ugh. I hate that lady so much.

“First and foremost,” says Harlowe. *“In regard to the burning of the Vanderbilt Hotel, I want to make it clear how disgusted I am by the state of the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs. This once-proud institution has become target practice for magicians two summers in a row. I blame this on a failure of leadership, and so I am relieving Chief Director Elizabeth Crowe of her duties, effective immediately. I will be stepping in to fill that position as well—”*

I’m just about to turn to Elsie to say how horrible this news is when the screen fades to black and Dylan Van Helsing’s face emerges, his bright red pupils piercing. My breath catches in my throat.

“Dylan Van Helsing here to interrupt your regularly scheduled drivel. Ignore the silly faun—she can’t protect you any more than the last Prime Minister. Allow me to show you what real power looks like.”

The scene shifts to an overhead image of a small castle at the heart an enormous city. It’s surrounded by a lush green lawn with a stone wall along its outer edge.

Elsie steps forward, her voice trembling. “Th-that’s Pemberley House. The headquarters of the London Bureau—” She doesn’t get to finish her sentence before the ground around the place begins to quake and the building falls in on itself. In seconds, it’s a pile of rubble.

My best friend lets out a sob. “Amari, I was just there on my Oxford visit. All those people—”

Dylan’s face reappears. “The supernatural world has hated magicians for as long as anyone can remember. You lock us up. You treat our living creations as second-class citizens. But now it’s your turn to feel frightened, to worry about what we think of *you*. Because now we fight back. I will give you one chance to save yourselves: Return the magicians you stole. And dismantle the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs. No longer will it be used as a weapon against our kind. From here on out, magicians are to be considered *untouchable*. I expect our demands to be met in the next twenty-four hours, *Prime Minister*. Or else.”

Dylan begins to turn but stops himself, a cold smile forming. “And a special shout-out to last night’s spy—you can’t hide forever.”



I STAND THERE, STUNNED.

So much destruction. Those demands. And he called me a spy, just like he did in my dream.

That proves it wasn't just in my head—somehow, that dream was real.

“We’ve got to tell Quinton,” I say. “He’s so focused on Harlowe and freeing the Bureau, but it’s Dylan and the League who are the real dangers.”

“Right.” Elsie still looks a bit shaken. “But that’ll mean another trip through this horrible house.”

I turn to Peek-a-Boo, who seems as frazzled as Elsie. “Can you show us the way to the basement?”

The ghost nods.

The trip downstairs is just as terrifying as the way up. Glowing yellow eyes appear inside a dark room, and something large and furry chases us through three hallways and down two flights of stairs. Thankfully Mrs. Chamberlain steps out of a doorway just as it’s about to pounce. She shoos away the hulking beast as though it’s a naughty house cat.

Finally, Peek-a-Boo stops and points at a staircase set into the floor. “Down there,” he says.

Me and Elsie thank him and rush downstairs. Quinton’s laughter echoes in the stairwell—no way he saw what Dylan just did.

Then comes a familiar voice, followed by a rumbling belly laugh I’d recognize anywhere.

I rush to the bottom of the stairs to find Quinton embracing a fuzzy beard and a cowboy hat. “Agent Magnus!” I sprint over to throw my arms around them both. “How are you here?”

Magnus laughs and steps out of the hug. “Gonna take a lot more than a mind-controlling faun to keep ol’ Magnus out of commission. Truth is, with all the commotion around Dylan’s fire at the Vanderbilt Hotel, Harlowe’s been too distracted to keep up with who needed a fresh dose of her mind control. A few of us came to our senses and were able to slip away. Your brother and I share a lot of the same contacts—when I got word that Quinton had reached out looking for information, I couldn’t believe it.”

Elsie comes over to stand next to me. She smiles and says, “It’s really good to have you here.”

“Where’s Agent Fiona?” I ask.

Magnus’s smile falters. “Don’t know. Harlowe keeps the folks she deems *useful* hidden away. Got a real talent for making people disappear, that one. Reckon she’s got my Melanie in the same place Maria’s been stashed.” He and Quinton meet one another’s gaze for a long moment, something unsaid passing between them.

I'm sure Magnus is right. Agent Fiona's supernatural ability lets her read people's intentions. That's gotta be valuable for somebody with secrets as big as Harlowe's.

"We're going to get them back," says Quinton, throwing an arm over Magnus's shoulders. "Now that you're here, we might actually stand a chance of stopping Harlowe."

"Wait," I say, remembering why we raced down here. "It's not Harlowe we should be worried about."

"Whatcha mean?" asks Magnus.

"Didn't you see the broadcast?" I ask.

Magnus shakes his head.

"Jayden and I were going to watch on that beat-up TV in the corner," says Quinton. "But then Magnus showed up."

"Then you guys missed Dylan's interruption," I say.

My brother frowns and I tell them about Dylan's demands and the destruction of Pemberley House.

"The Pemberley attack was likely for shock value," says Magnus. "Pemberley House would've been evacuated the moment the news about the Vanderbilt Hotel went public. As bad as it must've looked, I'd wager no one was actually hurt."

"Are you sure?" asks Elsie hopefully.

Magnus nods. "Positive."

"Then what was the point?" I ask.

"To show that he can," Jayden answers. "If you gonna make demands, better be able to back 'em up."

Quinton blows out a sigh. "What are the chances Harlowe actually gives in?"

"Zero," I say. "That faun's ego is a mile wide—she won't want to be remembered as the Prime Minister who surrendered, who disbanded the Bureau. Basically a loser. She'll fight to the bitter end."

"Except it won't be Harlowe doing the fighting," says Magnus. "It'll be agents—good men and women under her twisted control. We gotta stop her right now." He puts a hand on Quinton's shoulder, his expression suddenly intense. "Wasn't just me who got out. A couple other Special Agents—Clint and Xander—came with me. I've already got them tracking Harlowe's movements. If we can catch her alone and protect ourselves against her mind control, we'll make an arrest and get our Bureau back."

My brother nods. “Let me update Mrs. Chamberlain, then you and I can get going.”

I don’t get it. “Why are you so focused on Harlowe when *Dylan*’s the one attacking things? Those attacks might just be for show right now, but what about when his deadline passes and he doesn’t get what he wants? Or if he just changes his mind? What if he goes after a known world target next?”

“We’ve talked about this,” Quinton answers. “We can’t take on Dylan and the League on our own. We need Merlin’s magical might and guidance. And we need the Bureau behind us.”

“But what about—”

“It ain’t Dylan that’s got Melanie and Maria!” shouts Magnus, face red. He shakes his head, blowing out a heavy breath before his expression softens. “Sorry—it’s just hard not having Fiona around. It’s driving me up a wall not knowing what that faun might be doing to her.”

Guilt swirls inside me. Because it’s not just Quinton’s and Magnus’s partners who have fallen into Harlowe’s control, but mine too. I don’t know what’s happened to Lara Van Helsing since me and Elsie were forced to leave her behind at the Congress Room. If Harlowe was angry enough to declare us enemies of the supernatural world, how might she punish Lara?

The thought makes me sick.

Quinton puts a hand on my shoulder. “Stopping Harlowe also means Mama would get to come home sooner rather than later.”

What am I supposed to say to that? I know what’s at stake, and I know people we care about are in danger, but the same is true for so many others who might get caught up in all this. Quinton and Magnus didn’t see the look in Dylan’s eyes when he volunteered to become the League’s monster. They weren’t there in my dream. So maybe it’s time I tell them.

“Dylan created some kind of Wakeful Dream for the entire League of Magicians last night,” I say. “And I got sucked in too. He’s planning something awful. And he’s got some strange new power to help him do it.”

“Dream Meets are how the Night Brothers used to operate. Makes sense for Dylan to use the same mode of communication,” mutters Magnus. “Only, Dream Meets ain’t quite the same as Wakeful Dreams—Wakeful Dreams are regulated by the Department of Dreams and Nightmares for safety. Your mind can be violated in unauthorized dreams.”

Quinton frowns, crossing his arms. “Amari, you mentioned some kind of new power?”

“It was some kinda swirling blue light,” I say, “but the dream ended before I could see what it does.”

My brother shakes his head. “Why didn’t you tell me about this as soon as it happened?”

“I wasn’t sure the Dream Meet wasn’t just a bad nightmare,” I say. “And then we were on the run from those agents. It wasn’t until I saw Dylan on TV and he called me a spy again that I *knew*.”

“There was still time to tell me before now.” Quinton looks so disappointed. “The moment you know something, I need to know it too. I can’t keep you safe if you’re not completely honest with me.”

“I don’t *want* to be kept safe,” I say. “I want to be out there helping you.”

“After what you just told me?” he asks. “Dylan has made it clear he’s still actively trying to find you. And my job as your big brother comes before everything else. I made Mama a promise to keep you kids safe.”

Magnus clears his throat. “Not to pry into family matters, but Amari’s proven herself to be as capable as any Junior I’ve ever seen. The girl’s already faced down Harlowe and Dylan both—and lived to tell the tale. I say we bring her along. Give her a chance to show what she can do.”

But my brother just shakes his head again. “The deadline is in twenty-four hours. It’s barely enough time to coordinate anything as it is. We won’t have time for mistakes, and Juniors make mistakes. They just don’t have the experience.” He lowers himself so he’s eye-to-eye with me. “There’ll be plenty of chances for you to contribute once we’ve gotten the Bureau back, okay?”

I ball my fists, too angry to speak. How can Magnus see that I’m capable of helping but not my own brother?

Quinton sighs and straightens. “You kids stay put, and don’t leave Chamberlain Manor for any reason, understood? I’m going to speak to the Chamberlains and then Magnus and I will be on our way.”

Jayden and Elsie both nod. I don’t say anything. Not that Quinton seems to notice. He jogs upstairs.

I can’t believe I’m being left behind. Again.

Magnus taps my shoulder. “Got a moment?”

I cross my arms and shrug. “It’s not like I’ve got anywhere to be.”

He strokes his beard and smiles. “Can’t say I agree with your brother’s decision, but I do understand it.” I start to protest but he holds up a hand. “I’ve been training agents for decades, and you wanna know what I’ve learned?”

“What?” I ask.

“The hardest bit is knowing when to take the training wheels off. And that’s without being related to them.”

“Being related shouldn’t matter,” I say. “Quinton has to know there are bigger things to worry about than my safety.”

“Is that so?” asks Magnus. “Because I remember a rather single-minded trainee who showed up to the Bureau last summer with no intention of being any kind of hero. The only thing that mattered was finding her brother. Can’t you see how that might work in reverse too?”

I shake my head. “That’s different. I didn’t know anything about the supernatural world. It didn’t mean anything to me. But once I became a part of this world, I stopped thinking like that. There were times when I could’ve chosen Quinton over everyone else, and I didn’t because it wasn’t right.”

Magnus sighs. “You ain’t wrong. Trouble is, you and your brother are too much alike. Stubborn as you are brave. And while that fightin’ spirit is the reason you’re one of the best Junior Agents we’ve ever had, you still don’t know everything. And being responsible for the well-being of a child . . . well, it ain’t something you’ve ever experienced.”

“How did that start off as such a compliment and end up feeling like such a *non-compliment*?”

He laughs. “Just know this. It’s the job of adults to protect the kids they care about. Nothing comes before that—and I mean *nothing*.”

“So what are kids supposed to do when everyone *we* care about is rushing into danger? Just sit around and hope nothing bad happens? Because I can help—I know I can.”

“Then help,” says Magnus. “Agenting ain’t only about being out in the field. Most times it’s the folks who stay behind who make the difference. That’s where the real investigating takes place. Where you can analyze the details and look at the bigger picture.”

I think on that for a moment. He’s right. There is something I can do.



ONCE MY BROTHER AND MAGNUS HAVE LEFT, I SIT MY friends down to explain what I'm thinking. "The way I see it, Dylan's demands aren't going to be met by his deadline no matter who's in charge of the Bureau. And that means another attack."

Jayden nods grimly. "So what you thinking?"

“I got a glimpse of Dylan’s new power,” I say. “If we can figure out what it is, maybe we can get the word out and prevent more folks from being hurt.”

“It’s funny you say that,” says Elsie, suddenly sheepish. “When you were describing what you saw in the Dream Meet—that swirling blue light—it almost sounded like something I’ve seen before.”

“You mean you know what it is?” I ask, hopeful.

Elsie gives a quick head shake. “I don’t want to jump to conclusions. Let me grab my laptop so I can show you something, okay?” She doesn’t give me a chance to answer before turning for the stairs. “Peek-a-Boo, come with me.”

I didn’t even realize the ghost was still lurking overhead until he snaps a salute and says, “I’ll lead the way!”

When Elsie gets back with her laptop, she lifts it high over her head.

“Els, what are you—”

She slams the thing down at her feet. It hits the stone floor with a loud crack.

Jayden and I stare, jaws hanging open.

“Uh, don’t we need that?” asks Jayden.

“The Die-Fi network only connects to dead electronics,” she reminds us, bending to pick it up. “But don’t worry, I have everything backed up on the cloud.”

I can’t help a wince as she raises the bent edge of the laptop to reveal a cracked screen. Something loose rattles beneath the keyboard.

“I’m going to be heartbroken if this doesn’t work,” says Elsie.

Sure enough, a few seconds later ghostly letters float in the air before the screen.

Connect to Die-Fi?

Elsie hits enter and a ghostly screen appears. “We’re on the othernet! Let’s do a quick search and see what comes up.” She types in *Flashing/swirling blue light* into the search bar and clicks go.

The top hit shows a goblin in a suit being pulled over by a City of Atlanta squad car with flashing police lights.

Ever wonder if non-humans have to obey traffic laws? The answer might surprise you!

Elsie slumps as she continues to scroll. “The only blue light the othernet seems to recognize are police lights.”

“Not gonna lie,” says Jayden. “That’s what popped into my head too.”

“I was *really* hoping there was a better explanation than what I’m thinking,” says Elsie.

“Which is what exactly?” I press.

Elsie sighs and picks up the computer. When she blocks the screen from us, me and Jayden exchange a glance.

“Els?” I ask. “What’s wrong?”

“Depends on how you answer this next question.” Elsie swallows and turns the computer around. “Is this what you saw in the Dream Meet?”

A grainy black-and-white image appears, depicting a room full of men and women in white lab coats. At the center of the room is a small golden box positioned under a massive machine.

The researchers look on quietly as the machine fires a laser into the box, drilling a hole in the surface. This goes on for about a minute until finally the box breaks apart, releasing an orb of swirling blue light.

“That’s it!” I say. “That’s what I saw . . .” My voice trails off as I notice the color draining from Elsie’s face.

Onscreen, cheerful voices and laughter fill the quiet as the people along the edge of the room high-five one another and pop champagne. But then the orb becomes volatile, swirling faster and sending up sparks. The faces turn fearful, and some folks rush for the exits. But they never make it. The orb flares bright enough to fill the entire room—and suddenly the place is empty. Even the machinery is gone.

“Where’d they go?” Jayden asks.

“Gone,” Elsie answers. “As in *gone* gone.”

“I don’t get it,” I say. “What happened?”

Elsie closes the laptop. The rising panic in her expression makes me shiver.

“What you just saw was the Kaman Project,” says Elsie. “It’s the first and last time the Bureau has authorized the study of anti-magick. Before then, anti-magick was believed to be purely theoretical, a way to balance magical equations. Until those senior researchers found a way to make it real—and paid for it with their lives.”

“Just so I’m understanding,” I begin. “This, um, *anti-magick* took out that whole room of people?”

Elsie nods.

“Like a bomb,” I whisper.

“They ain’t deserve to go out like that,” says Jayden. “Not cool.”

Elsie nods her agreement. “The scientific theory of anti-magick states that it will eliminate anything magical it touches. It’s based on the idea that there is an equal and opposite force for everything in the universe, and when those two opposites meet, they cancel one another out. Like adding positive two and negative two—the end result is zero.”

“And them researchers vanished ’cause they all had magic,” says Jayden. “From when they touched the Crystal Ball as kids.”

“Right,” says Elsie.

“It seemed like the anti-magick came out of that box,” I say. “Do we know anything about it?”

Elsie shakes her head. “Director Fokus trusted me with the basics, but that’s it.”

“This is bad,” I say. “If Dylan learns to control anti-magick, this war is already over. No one stands a chance. Think about it—literally everything and everyone in the supernatural world is touched by magic in some way. Magic is what makes something supernatural in the first place.”

“Anti-magick is the perfect weapon,” says Elsie. “You could attack the supernatural world without the known world ever realizing. You could make the Bureau vanish, leaving the Vanderbilt Hotel behind. No one standing on the sidewalk outside could even tell the difference.”

I swallow. “Dylan’s making sure that when there’s an actual battle, he can’t lose.”

Jayden frowns. “Somethin’ ain’t adding up, though. If he really got power like that, why only show it to other magicians? If it was me, and I’m trying to scare the supernatural world into meeting my awful demands, I’m pulling out my scariest stuff. But all he did was knock over a building Magnus said already been evacuated.”

Jayden’s right. The threat alone of anti-magick should be enough to win this war. But Dylan isn’t making that threat. At least not yet.

“It was just a dream,” I say. “For all we know Dylan can’t actually create anti-magick in the real world. At least not yet.”

“That has to be it,” says Elsie, looking relieved. “I just wish we knew more about how it works—but everything about Project Kaman is super classified. The only reason I was even allowed to see the video is because

of a presentation I helped Director Fokus make called the *Forbidden Fields of Magical Science*. It was meant to be a warning to newly promoted researchers who've earned their top-secret security clearance."

"Any chance you could get access to the rest of that presentation?" I ask. "There might be more we can learn."

"There's a small chance I've still got a copy in the cloud." Elsie clicks on a different folder and begins to scroll until she reaches one called *Fokus Presentation*. Sadly, each of the half-dozen files grays out and vanishes the moment Elsie slides the cursor onto them. "Sorry, classified files tend to self-destruct once permission to access them ends."

Elsie backs out of the folder and sighs. "So much for that."

Jayden points to another file named *Kaman Notes*. "What's up with this one? It says shared file."

"Oh," says Elsie. "This must be the notes we took while putting the presentation slides together. Director Fokus wanted to prepare answers to potential questions her audience might have. I wasn't supposed to keep this."

"Well, now I'm definitely interested," I say.

Elsie nods and clicks on the file. Once it opens, she scrolls through pages and pages of equations and diagrams, none of which make any sense to me. But at the very end, we find a section titled: **More on Dr. J.**

"Dr. J?" Jayden raises an eyebrow. "The basketball legend?"

"Probably not." Elsie grins and squints to read the small font underneath. "I didn't write this part—Director Fokus must've added it just before presenting." She reads off the rest of the section.

-Sole survivor and lead researcher

-Blame for the Kaman tragedy forced him into retirement

-No longer appears in public, however written queries may be addressed to: 5424 East Monticello Ave, Atlanta, GA 30331

"He's still around," I say. "And he's in Atlanta."

"We should probably message Quinton," says Elsie.

Jayden nods. "He and Magnus need to know about this anti-magick stuff and how dangerous it is."

I glance between my friends. "We'll send a text explaining what we've found, but I don't think meeting with this Dr. J guy can wait."

Elsie narrows her eyes at me. “Please tell me you aren’t thinking of investigating this yourself.”

“Have you met Amari?” Jayden shakes his head. “Course she is.”

“Think about it . . . ,” I say. “Dr. J was the lead researcher—he’s bound to know how anti-magick works. Maybe he can explain how Dylan is planning to use it. Or if there’s some way to counter it. Besides, Quinton and Magnus have made it clear Harlowe is their top priority.”

“Don’t mean it gotta be you who goes,” Jayden follows. “Dylan still looking for you. And Harlowe made you an enemy of the supernatural world. It ain’t safe out there.”

I get to my feet and put my hands on my hips. “You guys sound like Quinton—my safety isn’t more important than the people we could help by stopping Dylan. If we’ve got a chance to make a difference, then how can we not do something?”

My friends just stare at me. But I can tell from their uncertain expressions that I’ve got a chance to win them over.

“I’m just going to ask a few questions,” I say. “Worst that can happen is he slams the door in my face.”

Jayden sits back, thinking. “How you getting there?”

“That part might be tricky,” I admit.

“I can get you a transporter.” Peek-a-Boo smirks.

“Really?” I say. “That would be awesome!”

“For a price,” says Peek-a-Boo, his expression cartoonishly devious. “A *trade*.”

“What kind of trade?” asks Elsie.

“Simple,” the ghost answers. “I do this for you, and you three do something for me.”

Jayden frowns. “Like what?”

“Oh, I’ll think of something,” says Peek-a-Boo. “The important thing is you can’t refuse.”

Elsie scoffs. “As if we’d make a trade like that—”

“We accept,” I say.

My best friend’s jaw drops. “Amari!”

“It’s a deal!” The ghost does excited laps in the air over our heads.

It’s evening by the time I’m ready to go. Peek-a-Boo delivered his mother’s ghostly transporter hours ago, but the only way to satisfy my friends’ concerns was to have a plan and go over it repeatedly.

“Guys,” I say. “There’s nothing that could possibly happen that we haven’t gone over. I mean, if an earthquake broke out, I’d know exactly what to do.”

“Just being thorough.” Elsie hands me a pair of earbuds. “Put these in and keep them in. I’ll be on the phone with you the entire time. That way I’ll know if anything happens.”

“Sure you wanna go it alone?” Jayden asks.

“I’m the only one with agent training,” I say. “And we’ve only got one Stun Stick.” I put in the earbuds. “All good?”

My friends give me a good looking over before Elsie says, “Think so.”

“Then let’s do this.” I pull back the sleeve of my shirt and type in the coordinates we looked up. Then I tap the button that bends the world around me until I’m standing in a dark alley.

A cat shrieks, making me jump. Overhead, a light flickers and cuts out.

“*Everything okay?*” Elsie’s voice comes through my earbuds.

“It’s dark,” I say. “Really dark.”

“*If you’re feeling spooked you should probably—*”

“I’m not abandoning the mission.” Instead I move quickly to the mouth of the alley where there’s light from the neighboring storefronts. Streetlamps glow across the street from a well-lit park. “The house should be just down the street.”

I step out onto the sidewalk, keeping my head down. Every shop has a *Closed* sign in the window. I make it far enough that I can start to see where the businesses surrounding the park begin to give way to fancy houses. Dr. J lives in one of those.

I’m so focused on what’s ahead that I don’t see a squad car pull up beside me, until it’s too late. The window rolls down, and a gray-haired cop in the passenger seat leans her head out the window. Her name reads *Martinez*.

“Park’s closed,” she announces. “Get on home.”

“I’m sorry, Officer. That’s, um . . . where I’m headed.” I gesture toward the neighborhood up ahead.

Officer Martinez nods and mutters something to her partner in the driver’s seat. “Fair enough. Hop in and we’ll drop you off at your door. Ain’t safe for a young lady to be walking alone at night.”

“Remember what Quinton said about being an enemy of the supernatural world,” says Elsie. “It’s not just the Bureau after you, but police in the known world too. You don’t wanna be in the back of a police car when they figure out who you are.”

She’s right. Officer Martinez is probably just being nice, but it’s not worth the risk. I swallow. “That’s okay, Officer. My place isn’t far—I can make it.” I continue walking.

The squad car moves forward, matching my pace.

“Hey,” says the driver. “Why does your face look so familiar? You ever been in trouble before?”

I shake my head, a nervous laugh rattling out of me. “I just have one of those faces, I guess.” When my eyes shift back to Officer Martinez, she’s squinting at me, suspicious.

“Everything okay?” she asks. “You seem awfully anxious.”

“F-fine,” I manage.

Officer Martinez nudges the driver with her elbow and the squad car stops. The driver turns on the police lights and the passenger door swings open. “Got some ID?”

I shake my head.

Martinez frowns. “Then tell me your name, kid.” She’s stepping out onto the sidewalk. “Address too—you know, since you live around here.”

“You need to get out of there,” says Elsie. *“Now.”*

“Well,” I say. “T-the thing is—”

A voice booms over the car radio: *“ATTENTION ALL UNITS, WE HAVE AN ARMED ROBBERY IN PROGRESS AT THE QUICK STOP GAS STATION ON THIRD STREET. PLEASE RESPOND.”*

“Get in, Martinez!” shouts the driver. “That’s only five minutes away.”

Martinez gives me one more look before she hops back into the squad car. “Get home!” They zoom off, sirens wailing.

I’ve never felt so relieved in my whole life.

“Are they gone?” asks Elsie.

“They’re gone,” I confirm.

Elsie blows out a long breath. *“Don’t suppose you’ll count yourself lucky and call this off?”*

“Not a chance,” I say, starting up the sidewalk again. Only this time, I’m much more aware of my surroundings.

That's why I'm ready when someone appears out of nowhere, yanking me sideways into the last alley on the street. I spin out of my attacker's grip, pull my Stun Stick from my sleeve, and aim it in one motion.

I gasp as I realize who I'm aiming at. It's the green-eyed kid from the Dream Meet. The one who randomly appeared and then disappeared in the Chamberlain Manor tour group this morning.

He raises his hands in surrender, offering me a nervous grin. "Don't shoot."

"Who *are* you?" I ask.

"My name is Lucas," he answers. "We've met before, remember?"



ELSIE'S SAYING SOMETHING THROUGH MY EARBUDS BUT I'm too rattled to focus on anything but this Lucas kid. "How are you here?"

“That has a lot to do with the type of magician I am,” says Lucas. He takes a step backward and vanishes.

I jump, my eyes darting around until I find him behind me, arms crossed. “You can teleport? Without a transporter?” I point my Stun Stick at him again.

“We call it spatial magic—but, yeah, pretty much. With certain limitations.”

It takes a few seconds for that to process. “Is that how you’ve been following me?”

Lucas nods. “Spatial magic is a fancy way of saying location magic. Meaning I can move instantly from one location to another. It also allows me to track others as *they* move from place to place. Normally I’d have to make physical contact first, to establish a connection, but in this case our brief interaction during the Dream Meet did the trick.”

He shows me his palm, where there’s a compass drawn onto his skin like a tattoo. The needle points right at me.

I don’t like the idea of someone knowing where I am at all times. “And *why* have you been tracking me?”

“To recruit you,” Lucas says quickly, his voice anxious. “I tried this morning, at Chamberlain Manor, but I didn’t want to risk being spotted by your brother. Not exactly a friend to magicians, that one. And once you went inside that creepy mansion, forget it.”

“Recruit me for what?” I ask.

“It’s like I said back in the Dream Meet. You’ve still got friends in the League. And we’d like you to join us.”

I almost laugh. “Rejoin the League of Magicians?”

Lucas shakes his head. “Join our resistance. Truth is, we need someone to rally behind. You may have lost your magic in the Great Game, but you’re still a born magician. You’re capable of leading the League once we take down Dylan.”

That gets me to lower my Stun Stick. “You want to stop Dylan?”

“There aren’t many of us,” he admits, “and we’re mostly apprentices. But we believe in the way things used to be. Keeping to ourselves and only using fair magick. The League may have been founded by a Night Brother, but we made the decision long ago not to follow in their footsteps. We shouldn’t be making threats and attacking people.”

Finally, I relax enough to hear Elsie’s worried voice in my earbuds.

“Amari,” she says. “*Can you hear me?*”

“Sorry,” I say. “I’m listening now.” I point to my ears to let Lucas know I’m speaking to someone else.

“Hello, friend on the phone,” he announces.

Elsie sounds concerned. “*I’ve been listening to your conversation. How do we know we can trust him?*”

It’s a good question. So I put it to Lucas.

He doesn’t seem offended. “You can trust me because Dylan is obsessed with finding you. And I could’ve gained a lot of favor by turning you in.”

Elsie says, “*That’s true.*”

“All right,” I say to Lucas. “If we’re on the same side, then tell me how Dylan plans to use the anti-magick he showed off at the Dream Meet.”

Lucas shrugs. “You know as much as I do. Dylan only shares his plans with a few high-ranking magicians in the League. The rest of us don’t get explanations, only orders to follow so we can prove our loyalty. And anyone who doesn’t comply gets their magic stripped away.” He clears his throat. “Can I ask a question now?”

“Go on,” I say.

Lucas steps closer, pulling out his phone to show it to me. On the screen there’s a *USA Today* news article with my face on it, beneath the headline: *Teen girl sought by the FBI for questioning in connection to multiple investigations.* “Why are you out walking around when both the known world and supernatural world authorities are looking for you?”

Elsie’s voice chimes in my ear. “*It’s your call how much to share.*”

I want to trust him. Having an ally within the League could be huge for us. I swallow. “I’m here to learn more about anti-magick. There’s a doctor who lives nearby who might be able to give me some answers.”

Lucas nods, thinking. “I’ll come with you. Unless you don’t want the backup.”

“*I’d certainly feel better with someone watching your back,*” says Elsie.

I offer Lucas a fist bump. “Okay, Nightcrawler, let’s do this.”

Lucas grins and rolls his eyes. “Like I haven’t heard that one before.”

We head out of the alley and soon we’ve left the bright lights of the park and stepped into the softer glow of the streetlights in the surrounding neighborhood.

“That’s 5424 East Monticello down there.” I point to an abandoned-looking house with boarded-up windows and overgrown grass. It sits alone, the only house on the cul-de-sac. Thick woods stretch behind it.

As we get move closer, I spot a dented mailbox out front. Alphabet stickers spell out:

**Dr. Jake Hill
Residence**

“Els,” I say. “I think I’ve got his full name. Look up whatever you can about a Dr. Jake Hill.”

“*That’s odd,*” says Elsie. “*I assumed the ‘J’ stood for his last name.*”

“Guess not,” I say.

Lucas cocks his head. “You sure somebody lives there?”

“Don’t suppose you could teleport in and find out?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I’ve gotta be able to picture a person or a place for my magic to work. I don’t know what the house looks like inside.”

“Then I guess we’ve got no choice but to go over and say hello,” I say.

We creep up to the wire fence and slip inside. The first thing I notice is the wide-open front door. *Weird*. Especially for someone who’s supposed to be so private.

Given how dark it is inside the house, I’d almost believe Lucas is right about no one being home. But low voices reach us from inside—one high pitched, the other a deep rumbling tone. It sounds as though they’re having an argument.

I slide my Stun Stick back out of my sleeve, just in case. Lucas steps beside me, a block of ice forming over his clenched fist. That must be his secondary magic.

“Ready when you are,” Lucas whispers.

My palms feel sweaty as I reach up to knock. I step fully into the doorway and use my most polite voice: “Dr. Hill, could we please have a moment of your time?”

The voices go quiet.

“*Be careful,*” comes Elsie’s voice through my earbuds.

I lean inside. The living room is a mess. Overturned furniture, a table cracked in half. And there are papers strewn everywhere. In the hallway, at the back of the room, a door squeaks open then slams shut.

“They’re inside . . . more magicians!” The voices are definitely coming from behind one of those doors in the back hallway.

“More magicians?” I whisper, looking to Lucas.

He shrugs.

“*Let him know who you are,*” Elsie insists through the earbuds.

“Um, hello? My name is Amari Peters. I’m here to ask you about anti-magick—”

“That’s the same thing the other magician wanted! The boy with red eyes. I told you everything I know, so why come back? Why?”

Dylan was here? No wonder this place is a mess. He must’ve bullied this guy for answers about anti-magick. Which means he’s already one step ahead of us.

“The boy with red eyes was Dylan Van Helsing,” I say. “We aren’t with him. In fact, we want to stop him from using anti-magick to hurt people.”

“Lies!” yells the voice. “You came here to finish us off! Didn’t want any loose ends, but he was in too much of a hurry to do the job himself. Well, we’ve got a nasty surprise for you!”

“Who’s we? Who else is here?” Lucas asks, scanning the room.

“Please,” I call out. “I’m telling the truth. Just tell us what you told Dylan and we’ll leave, I promise.”

As a show of good faith, I toss my Stun Stick into the hallway. It clatters against the hardwood floor. “I’m completely defenseless now.”

The door creaks open and a skinny guy in a white lab coat leans out to take a look. Dr. Hill is a wrinkled old man with a bald head and blue eyes that look huge on his skinny face, as though he’s always surprised.

“A Stun Stick? We used to have one of those.” He reaches down to pick it up, twirling it expertly through his fingers. “We were quite good too. Legendary. The Bureau made us one of their notable agents before the Kaman Project ruined our name and forced us into exile.”

“You were an agent?” I ask. “I thought you were a researcher?”

“We were both!” the old man shouts back. He steps cautiously out of the room, dusting himself off.

“*Amari!*” Elsie’s voice is a shout in my ear. “*Only one person has ever done two jobs at the Bureau at the same time. The name Dr. Jake Hill sounds an awful lot like Dr. Jekyll! As in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde!*”

That’s why he kept saying “we” and “us.” Because he’s two different people at once! I don’t know much about Mr. Hyde as an agent, but I saw a

picture once. He's not someone you want angry with you.

"I've got no love for the Bureau after they railroaded me into early retirement," says Dr. Jekyll. "But I told that Dylan Van Helsing too much. I'll not have any more deaths on my conscience."

"What did you tell him?" asks Lucas.

Dr. Jekyll speaks in a strained voice. "The only known sources of anti-magick are ancient inventions known as Wonders. My team made the mistake of taking one apart to get to the anti-magick inside—it was quite the feat, requiring an extraordinary amount of magic. Only we didn't fully understand what a volatile and destructive force we were dealing with. In a matter of moments, the anti-magick exploded and emptied our entire lab of life. I only survived because I had already teleported back to Atlanta to share the news of our discovery."

That must've been what we saw on Elsie's computer, when they drilled a hole into that golden box. They were extracting anti-magick. "What are these Wonders exactly? And who created them?"

"Utterly marvelous inventions!" Dr. Jekyll shivers, his skin taking on a sickly color. "But also *horrible* creations. All crafted by the original magician."

The original magician? I learned in the Great Game that the Night Brothers weren't the first, that magicians are ancient, going as far back as Alexander the Great. Still, I never gave much thought to who might've been first. But as curious as I am now, that's not what's most important. "Where do we find these Wonders—" I cut myself short at the sight of Dr. Jekyll doubling over.

"The mural, child! What little is known can be found there!" Dr. Jekyll starts coughing. "We're sorry, we held off for as long as we could. We thought the Van Helsing boy sent you here to finish us off so we had already begun the transformation process. You must leave! Our other half has grown bitter these long years. We aren't the hero we once were—we aren't to be reasoned with!"

"Transformation?" asks Lucas, visibly confused.

"We need to go," I say. "Now!"

I turn and start for the door, dragging Lucas along behind me. A loud thump rattles the windows as something crashes hard into the near wall. As we stumble out of the house, a rumbling laugh echoes into the warm night air.

“Why, we haven’t mangled anyone in ages,” comes a gravelly voice. “There’s just something about the way little bones crunch when you break ’em.”

I pull back the sleeve of my jacket just in time to see a Stun Stick blast slam into my transporter so hard it spins me around in the air. I hit the ground.

“No fair trying to leave so soon,” the voice booms from inside the house.

Lucas is above me in an instant. “I can’t take people with me when I teleport, but I can create portals to escape through.” Quickly, he draws a glowing circle into the air. Through it, Chamberlain Manor appears.

But I don’t get to step through. Because a Stun Stick blast slams into Lucas’s chest, knocking him into the fence post.

“Lucas!” I shout, scrambling to his side. The boy is out cold.

“Looks like this Special Agent has still got it after all these years.” Something massive slinks around the house. Dr. Jekyll isn’t scrawny anymore. He’s beefed up like the Hulk’s big brother. His arms are as thick as tree trunks, his fists the size of my chest. Those blue eyes are the only feature I recognize on his massive bald head, and even they look menacing. With a wicked smile, he takes a bow. “Allow us to introduce ourselves, kiddies. The name’s Mr. Hyde now.”



MR. HYDE CRACKS HIS MASSIVE KNUCKLES, POINTING the largest stun Stick I've ever seen at me. "Aren't you going to run? It's so much more fun when you run."

The thought of ditching Lucas makes me feel sick, but if I can lead this brute far enough away, it might give him a chance to escape once he comes to. And honestly, I don't have any other ideas.

So I dart into the woods, ducking another Stun Stick blast that only just misses. Mr. Hyde is scary good with that thing. I tear through the trees, my heart pounding, and to my relief the monster gives chase.

“There’s nowhere you can run!” Mr. Hyde calls. “We know these woods like the back of our hand!”

I duck behind a tree and crouch low. Tree trunks crack and snap as Mr. Hyde pummels his way toward me. Frantic, I pat my pockets for my phone, but it’s not there. I must’ve dropped it someplace. No wonder I haven’t heard Elsie’s voice in my earbuds.

I force myself to take slow, trembling breaths.

“We can smell your fear, little one,” calls Mr. Hyde. “Just give up and allow us to wring your neck, it’ll be over before you know it.”

I take off full speed through the woods.

“There you are!”

The forest parts around Mr. Hyde as he turns and comes barreling after me.

I reach the house first and dive through the back door. If Mr. Hyde is using his own Stun Stick, then mine must still be here somewhere. I find it beneath an upside-down sofa and dart through the front door.

Lucas is still out cold. Meaning this is where I make my stand. Without my magic, this Stun Stick will have to be enough. I turn and face the monster, my Stun Stick aimed at his massive chest. Maybe one blast won’t stun someone his size, but if I land enough shots, he’s gotta feel it eventually, right?

Mr. Hyde grins. “You’ll need a higher setting on that Stun Stick to take me down. But they don’t give Junior Agents higher settings, do they?”

I could probably outrun Mr. Hyde, but that would mean leaving Lucas behind. And I won’t do that again—I won’t repeat the same mistake I made with Lara. So I fire my Stun Stick anyway. Again and again.

The brute was right. He doesn’t even react to the blasts. My heart drops into my belly.

I’m out of options.

Shivering, I take a giant step backward . . .

Twin bursts of light whiz past me and connect with Mr. Hyde. He staggers, surprised.

The shots keep coming, one after another, until I see a figure floating over my head.

“Quinton!” I shout. I’ve never been happier to see my brother.

He jumps and dives and flips, his feet never touching the ground as he delivers blast after blast to Mr. Hyde, who throws desperate blows that don’t even come close to landing. It’s like the rust from Quinton’s long slumber has finally gone. Or maybe it’s just his adrenaline pumping. Whatever the reason, my brother looks like his old self again.

Eventually the shots begin to take their toll, and Mr. Hyde slows, the effect beginning to take hold.

Mr. Hyde becomes sluggish. “The Bureau abandoned us,” he wails. “It wasn’t our fault what happened to those researchers. It ain’t fair . . . we . . .” Mr. Hyde falls to a knee, his eyelids beginning to droop.

The hulking giant tips over with a thud, snoring loudly.

Quinton turns, his eyes frantic. “Amari?”

I get to my feet and run to my brother, who wraps me up in a hug.

His heart is beating so fast I can feel it against my cheek.

“Are you hurt?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” I say. “How did you—”

“Elsie,” he answers. “I called to check in and she told me everything. What were you thinking, coming here alone?”

“I’m not alone,” I say, turning to where Lucas was just lying. But he’s gone.

Quinton closes his eyes and blows out a long breath. “Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“I can’t make that promise,” I say. “I have to do what I think is right.”

Quinton shakes his head. “Then you and I can never work together.”

“But I did good,” I say. “I know what Dylan is after—”

“That information isn’t worth *your life*. From now on, you stay put when I tell you.”

“I won’t,” I say again.

Quinton sets his jaw. “You will.”

Even though it’s late, Elsie and Jayden are both waiting up for me in the living room.

My best friend gives me the biggest hug as Jayden stands there grinning. I try not to tear up, but there’s a special kind of joy that comes from making it back to friendly faces after not being sure you’d ever see them again.

But it's not long before they start to sense the not-so-great energy between me and Quinton.

Elsie glances between us a few times. "Maybe we can talk about what we've learned?"

"Do you know where Dylan is hiding?" Quinton asks me. "Or even where his next attack might be?"

"No," I say. "But—"

My brother blows out a sigh. "Then whatever you've got to tell me can wait until I return in the morning. Magnus needs me back ASAP. We had a real shot at Harlowe tonight but . . ." He doesn't have to finish.

"But you had to come and save me." Guilt swirls in my gut. "I did the right thing." I will myself not to cry. I don't want to look like his pitiful little sister right now.

"I know you think that, Amari," says Quinton. "But I can't help wondering if becoming a hero so fast has taught you the wrong lessons. Being part of a team means following orders. You can't just run off on your own and hope things work out. Magnus needed me and I wasn't there."

I stand still, feeling like a total failure, as Quinton types coordinates on his transporter. And then he's gone.

Elsie and I decide to stay in the basement with Jayden. They've each told me a million times that we did the right thing, but it doesn't stop Quinton's words from replaying in my head again and again.

But I can't dwell on that. Because Dylan's twenty-four-hour deadline ends tomorrow morning. And now that we know how he plans to get anti-magick, we need to figure out how to stop him.

If Dylan was willing to destroy an entire building for shock value, what might he do to show he's serious?

"Just so I'm understanding," says Jayden, "there's these inventions called Wonders, and they've all got anti-magick inside them?"

"It's pretty much what we saw on the Kaman Project video, isn't it?" Elsie chimes in. "Those researchers shot a laser into that golden box—which must've been a Wonder—until it broke apart and released the anti-magick inside, destroying everyone and everything in that room."

I nod. "That must be Dylan's plan. To find these Wonders and use them as anti-magick bombs. With a weapon like that, the supernatural world would give him whatever he wanted."

“Except Dylan got more magic than anybody,” says Jayden. “Wouldn’t anti-magick be dangerous to him and other magicians too?”

“Definitely,” says Elsie. “But I’m sure Dylan knows that already.”

“Let’s assume Dylan knows what he’s doing,” I say. “What we’ve gotta do is find the Wonders before he does.”

Elsie shrugs and picks up her laptop. “We don’t even know what these Wonders look like. I’ve run a gazillion searches on the othernet and there’s nothing about them at all. But then, I guess there’s nothing about the Kaman Project either. I’ll bet it’s all been classified.”

“Wait,” I say. “Dr. Jekyll said something about a mural. . . .” I think for a moment and then repeat what he told me. “‘What little is known can be found there.’”

“Good!” This time Elsie types in *mural* and *Wonders*. Her hopeful smile fades. “Still nothing.”

I’m about to suggest another search when the world begins to sway. A familiar wave of dizziness sends me stumbling off balance.

And then I’m falling, the floor rushing up to meet me.

I never hit the ground.

Instead, I’m standing in a forest of twinkling neon lights. Trees and shrubs shimmer before me in a rainbow of pastel colors. Even the birds that float past seem to glitter silver and gold.

I know where I am. The Van Helsing lake house. Dylan brought me here last summer to show off the vast forest illusion he’d created. It’s where we created the Amari blossom—back when I thought we were friends.

The first time I saw this place, I was in awe. But now it feels like my heart wants to beat through my chest. I’m terrified. Because the last time I was pulled into a dream like this, it was by—

There’s a rustle in the trees, and a figure in red robes and a shiny black Crown emerges.

Dylan.

He grins at me. It’s so much like the old Dylan that I’d almost believe it was genuine if his reddened eyes weren’t so menacing. “Told you I’d find you.”

I take a step back. “W-what is this? What’s going on?”

“A more . . . *personal* Dream Meet,” he says. “Sharing magic creates a connection between two magicians, no different than if we were master and

apprentice—I must’ve really been on your mind just now. Our bond felt so vibrant I couldn’t resist summoning you here.”

My mind feels hazy, but I remember what my friends and I were doing. Figuring out a way to find the Wonders before he does.

So I ask, “What do you want?”

He frowns. “To make a deal. You know something you shouldn’t. Something I’m not ready for the supernatural world to know just yet.”

So much for hiding what I know. “You mean anti-magick. And the Wonders.”

There’s a flicker of annoyance in his features but it’s gone in an instant. “You’ve done your research since our last meeting.”

“Only a monster would use a weapon like that.”

“Everything I do is for the good of magiciankind,” he says. “But that’s always been your problem, hasn’t it? You put your morals above the well-being of your own kind. You’re no different from the League, happy to see us suffer if it means you get to call yourself one of the good guys.”

“If you mean I’m not willing to hurt people to get what I want, then you’re right.”

He shakes his head. “I’m here to make peace, Amari. We don’t have to be enemies anymore. Without your magic, you’re harmless.”

Is he being serious right now? A surge of anger flares up inside me. “You tried to kill me, Dylan. More than once. We’ll never be friends again.”

His calm mask slips. “Foul magick makes me do things I don’t mean. It’s overpowering, but you know that already. I saw you in the final challenge of the Great Game, watched you lose yourself to the power. You would’ve destroyed me if Elsie hadn’t stopped you.”

“Maybe,” I say. “But that’s the point of having friends—to stand up to you when you’re making a mistake. I used to feel so sorry for you because you didn’t have someone like that. But I tried to be that person for you last summer. And you nearly destroyed me.”

Dylan frowns, and a wave of desperate loneliness washes through me. It takes me a moment to realize it’s not *my* emotion I’m feeling. I shiver—we really are connected. But what does that mean exactly?

“Is that why you brought me here?” I ask. “Because you’ve got no one else? You’ve threatened and bullied and hurt anyone who’s ever gotten close to you.”

“Don’t you dare talk down to me,” Dylan growls, his red pupils flaring. “If you want to hate me, fine. I’m here to make a deal, not hold hands.”

“What kind of deal?” I ask.

“I give you my word that no one you care about will be hurt,” he begins, “so long as you keep your mouth shut about both the Wonders and anti-magick. I’ll call off every magician I’ve got looking for you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t believe you.”

Dylan strides closer, fists clenched. He must read something in my expression because he says, “You’ve already talked, haven’t you? Who did you tell?”

I take a step back and an image of my brother appears between us.

It stops Dylan in his tracks. He looks scared. “So the rumors are true . . . Quinton’s awake?”

“How did . . . ?” My breath catches. That’s not just my brother, it’s exactly how he looked the last time I saw him. When he saved me from Dr. Jekyll.

Dylan isn’t just reading my expression, he’s reading my mind. If we really are connected right now, Dylan somehow must’ve pulled the memory from my head.

His fear melts into anger. “How much does Quinton know?”

“He knows everything!” I lie, hoping to scare him even more.

Dylan growls in frustration and flames pour from his hands, melting away the forest illusion. “Why can’t you ever put magicians first? I should’ve known better than to try to reason with you. I’ve made myself the most powerful magician to ever live and I’ll do whatever it takes to protect magiciankind. Even if I have to rip through every Peters to do it!”

Fire rages around me and I cower under the weight of the pulsing heat. But through the blaze I see something else—a stone basement has begun to replace the forest illusion. The image is fuzzy, and Dylan doesn’t seem to recognize what he’s seeing. But I do.

It’s the Chamberlains’ basement.

Dylan must be pulling this memory out of my head too.

Panicking, I do the only thing I can think of to wake myself up. I leap into the flames.

I wake with a start to find a ghostly eyeball floating just above my face.

“She’s awake!” Peek-a-Boo calls, floating over to retrieve his eyeball. He grins down at me. “They told me to keep an eye on you.”

Elsie and Jayden appear above me, and I do my best to sit up.

“Are you all right?” asks Elsie. “You’ve been out cold since last night.”

“Since last night?” I repeat, stunned. It only felt like a few minutes in the dream.

Jayden nods. “Barely caught you before you face-planted onto the floor.”

“Thanks for that,” I say. “It was another Dream Meet. Only this time it was just me and Dylan. It was pretty scary—he’s not happy we know what he’s planning.”

Elsie raises an eyebrow. “The same Dylan who was just captured?”

“What do you mean, captured?” I ask, realizing it’s now the morning of his deadline. “Has the deadline passed? Was there an attack?”

“It never happened.” Elsie points to the battered TV in the corner. And, sure enough, there’s Harlowe posing in front of thick steel doors.

“Turn it up,” I say.

“. . . we’re back with the top story of the day. Dylan Van Helsing has been captured inside the Ancient Texts vault at the Supernatural Smithsonian beneath Washington, DC. Though power to the vault had been cut, it appears Van Helsing tripped a hidden hex, causing magic-canceling doors to slam shut behind him.”

I shake my head. “There’s no way Dylan would do anything that boneheaded.”

“Same thing Elsie been saying,” says Jayden. “But if Dylan looking for the mural that Dr. Jekyll told us about, don’t a museum seem like the kinda place it would be?”

I bite down on my lip. “That’s a good point.” Could we really have gotten this lucky?

Harlowe appears onscreen, giddy. *“I would like to congratulate my agents for the capture of Dylan Van Helsing. So many times they’ve expressed how inspired they feel to have a capable leader such as myself in charge. And it shows in the results.”*

Offscreen, a reporter asks, *“What do you say to those who are skeptical that it really is Dylan Van Helsing in there? Magicians wearing*

illusions have been captured before, most famously the man pretending to be Raoul Moreau last summer.”

Harlowe’s smile thins. *“We’ll of course be releasing the surveillance footage shortly. But think about it—if it weren’t really Dylan Van Helsing in there, then what about the deadline he made such a fuss about? It came and went without incident!”*

“A remarkable turn of events!” the offscreen reporter continues. *“Is it safe to say, then, that this war is already over?”*

“I say this to the supernatural world: the threat is no more. To commemorate this most special occasion I’ll be throwing a Victory Gala tomorrow night on my birthday. Perhaps we’ll even make it an official holiday! Harlowe Victory Day!”



“WE’VE GOT TO BE MISSING SOMETHING,” I SAY.

My friends and I are gathered around the small TV in the dining room. The Necrotic News Network has had surveillance footage of the capture practically on a loop.

It shows Dylan leading a small group of magicians into a large metal vault. They immediately fan out to search the shelves. The footage speeds up to show a squadron of agents arriving. There's a standoff and the doors of the vault slam shut, trapping the magicians inside.

In a rage, Dylan releases a torrent of fire that sends the other magicians ducking beneath tables to escape his wrath. Then the clip ends.

"It *looks* real," says Elsie. "I'll give it that much."

"Shouldn't we be happy?" asks Jayden.

"I want to believe Dylan's been captured," I say. "But there's just no way he could summon me to a Dream Meet and raid the Supernatural Smithsonian at the same time. Besides, doesn't it seem too good to be true?"

"Ah!" Mrs. Chamberlain exclaims, making us jump. "You're all here! Let me show you what I've made!"

Fancy bowls with elaborate designs come floating out from the kitchen and onto the table in front of us. It makes me hopeful that maybe the same care has been given to the meal too. We're in an undead house of horrors, after all—there's a good chance the awful smell coming from the kitchen has nothing to do with the food.

Our hostess disappears behind the door and quickly returns with a giant tureen of steaming stew that seems way too hot to be holding with bare hands. Though I guess when you're literally on fire, a little heat doesn't bother you. She tips the stew into our bowls and one by one we recoil, leaning back in our chairs as far as possible.

"Is it supposed to smell like feet?" asks Jayden.

Mrs. Chamberlain grins. "That'll be the foot shavings! I was out of clipped toenails so had to make do. Anyway, there should be plenty of freshly picked spiders in there to make up for it. They're grown right here in our cellar."

Elsie gags, and I try to think of a good excuse to get as far away from this "stew" as possible.

Peek-a-Boo, though, is clearly having fun with this whole thing. He's floating over the table, twirling slowly, his grin growing wider with each passing second. "Dearest Mother, what else is in this wonderful dish?"

“Please,” says Elsie, looking sick. “You don’t have to answer that question.”

“Yeah,” says Jayden. “Don’t wanna, uh, steal your recipe.”

But Mrs. Chamberlain is too excited not to answer. “Nonsense! There are tomatoes, carrots, onions, and a dash of red wine . . . but the stars of the dish are the braised bat ears and roasted rat tails. Bon appétit!”

Elsie looks ready to throw up. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to use the restroom.”

“Go on, dear!” says Mrs. Chamberlain. “But do hurry, you don’t want your soup getting cold!”

My best friend can’t get out of here fast enough.

Mrs. Chamberlain hesitates and then says, “Poor thing, I’d better go check on her.” She follows Elsie into the hallway.

I take another look at my soup and frown. No way I’m eating this. Thankfully, a granola bar comes sliding across the table.

Jayden grins at me. “For Wilderness Appreciation class we had to spend a whole day living out in nature. We was supposed to eat magic berries and stuff we found in the natural habitat, but the older Creature Control kids just told us to stuff these in our backpacks—figured they’d come in handy while we hiding out.”

I rip off the wrapper and scarf it down. “My belly thanks you. I was *starving*.”

“Think Quinton heard the news?” he asks.

“Everyone’s heard by now,” I say. “I wouldn’t be surprised if my brother and Magnus don’t come back at all. They’re probably already working on another plan to get Harlowe. Especially when she made it clear she’ll be at the Victory Gala tomorrow night.”

“Makes sense,” Jayden agrees.

“I just wish we had some way to prove Dylan isn’t in that vault—”

A phone goes off. But it’s not mine. Across the table, Jayden pats his pockets and then pulls out the flip phone my brother gave him.

He frowns and shows me the screen.

Call from Amari Peters

“Me?” I ask. “That can’t be right, I lost my phone last night—”

Before I can finish the thought, Jayden answers the call. “Wassup?” He nods a couple times and then looks to me, whispering, “You know a Lucas?”

He wanna speak to you.”

My eyes go wide, and I extend a hand. “Gimme.”

Jayden hands me the phone and I say, “Hello?”

“Amari—*You dropped your phone fighting Dr. Jekyll. I meant to give it back but bailed when your brother showed up. Though it’s actually a good thing I did, because we need to talk. ASAP.*”

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“*Is Quinton around?*” Lucas asks.

“No,” I say. “He’s out looking for Harlowe.”

“*Good,*” says Lucas. “*I’m coming over—*”

“Hold on,” I say. But it’s too late.

Lucas is standing on the dining room table. In full magician’s robes.

“Oooh!” cries Peek-a-Boo. “I’m telling Father! Amari’s sneaking boys into the house!”

No, no, no. Mr. Chamberlain already hates my friends being here and that’s *with* us having his wife’s permission. There’s no telling how he’d react to having an active member of the League of Magicians in his dining room.

“Wait,” I say before Peek-a-Boo can disappear through the wall. “What would it take for you to keep quiet?”

A mischievous grin lights his ghostly face. “Oh, I’ll think of something. But you’d better get down to the basement before Father Dearest sniffs out your guest. He’s still fuming about Agent Magnus showing up here unannounced.”

“Right,” I say. “Everyone, follow me.”

I slip out of the dining room and into the hallway. Jayden steps to my side while Lucas follows closely, his expression tense. It’s enough to make me wonder what’s so important he’d risk showing up somewhere he deemed “too creepy” last night.

We run into Elsie. My best friend still looks a little queasy.

With a groan, Elsie rubs her belly and asks, “Where are you guys headed?”

“Basement.” Jayden sighs. “Amari doing something she shouldn’t again.”

Elsie begins to nod but jumps. “And we’re aware there’s a boy I’ve never seen before in the hall with us?”

“Elsie, meet Lucas,” I answer.

Lucas bows. "Pleasure to meet you in person, girl on the phone."

I start toward the basement again. "Hurry!"

As we rush down the nearest staircase, Mrs. Chamberlain calls after us. "Don't worry! I'll pack these bowls up and have Peek-a-Boo bring them to you later when you're a little hungrier!"

Me, Elsie, and Jayden settle into the dusty chairs in the basement. Lucas stays on his feet.

"Let's hear it," I say. "What've you got to tell us?"

"For starters, don't believe what's being reported," says Lucas. "Dylan is free and still ordering the League around."

I share a look with Jayden and Elsie. "I knew it!"

Lucas continues. "And while the supernatural world is celebrating, he's already found the mural Dr. Jekyll told us about. It was in some museum."

I lean forward in my chair. "The Supernatural Smithsonian. Jayden, you were right. Dylan did go to that vault looking for the mural."

"But why go to the trouble of making it look like he's been captured?" asks Elsie. "Just to fool Harlowe?"

"Dylan's covering his tracks," I say. "I'll bet he stole the mural and escaped, and then sent in a different magician wearing his face to get captured on purpose. As long as Harlowe and everyone else thinks that he's stuck in that vault, no one will suspect the mural's even missing. He can go after the Wonders without anyone knowing."

Elsie nods, catching on. "And no one's going to risk opening that vault anytime soon if they believe the most dangerous magician in the world is trapped inside. It's genius."

"It's gotta be why Dylan offered me a deal to keep quiet," I say, thinking. "He never meant to summon me to that first Dream Meet with the entire League. I'm not supposed to know he's after the anti-magick built into the Wonders. Dylan got so furious at the thought that I might've told Quinton about his plans."

"Of course he did," says Elsie. "News of your brother's return would make headlines everywhere . . . and people would listen to what he has to say. Especially at the Bureau. Not even Harlowe could ignore that."

"But Quinton focused on Harlowe," says Jayden. "Not Dylan."

I blow a frustrated breath. "Dylan doesn't know that. And I kinda made it seem like I told Quinton everything. I just wanted to scare Dylan,

make him back down. But I've just made things worse, haven't I?"

Lucas crosses his arms. "If Dylan's afraid Quinton and the Bureau will interfere with finding the Wonders, it explains his new orders. Instead of keeping a low profile, now we're to attack the Victory Gala and 'deal with the Bureau and the Prime Minister' once and for all."

"It's not just the top people from the Bureau who'll be there." Elsie shakes her head, stunned. "Harlowe's invited celebrities to the Victory Gala too. The whole supernatural world will be watching."

"That's the point, Els," I say. "Dylan's afraid his plans won't be secret for much longer, so he's trying to deliver a knockout blow the supernatural world can't recover from. He's trying to win the war in one night."

"Ain't there something we can do?" asks Jayden.

"That's actually why I've come . . ." Lucas's phone buzzes and his words trail off. He taps the screen a few times and then smiles. "Better late than never, I guess. You guys mind some more company?"

We look at Peek-a-Boo, who's been oddly quiet over in the corner. The ghost is beaming.

"Chamberlain Manor hasn't had this much excitement in decades!" he cackles. "Just remember you owe me big-time!"

"Guess that's a yes," I say.

Elsie groans. "But at what cost?"

Lucas draws a glowing circle in the air between us. The inside of a cluttered closet appears, and an Asian girl with blue highlights steps into view. Just like Lucas, she looks to be a year or two older than me and my friends.

"Name's Hannah," the girl says, climbing through the portal. She steps over to me, suddenly nervous. "And you must be *the* Amari Peters. It's a pleasure to meet you."

My cheeks burn at the awe in her expression. I know it's only because I was born a magician, and what that means to the League. But it still feels like praise I haven't earned. "It's, um, a pleasure to meet you too."

Hannah turns to Lucas. "Sorry I'm late, I had the hardest time getting away. Dylan's attack order has sent the League into complete chaos."

"I've told them pretty much everything but the plan," says Lucas.

"Good." Hannah sits on the floor in front of us. "We plan to steal the mural from Dylan. Once we've got it, then we can go about finding the Wonders before he can."

“I get why we want the Wonders,” I say. “But why do you guys want them?”

“They aren’t just random items to be ripped apart for their anti-magick,” says Hannah. “They’re the most powerful magical inventions ever created. We’re hoping we can use them to fight back against Dylan.”

“I like the sound of that,” I say.

“Hannah and I know where the mural is going to be stashed for safekeeping,” says Lucas. “We plan to sneak in and steal it during the attack on the Victory Gala. But we can’t be in two places at once. That means we can’t do much to sabotage Dylan’s plans at the gala.”

Jayden lifts an eyebrow. “Wait, so it’s just y’all two? Don’t you need a few more people to call yourself a resistance?”

Hannah sighs. “We’ve got more apprentices involved, but the risk of Dylan finding out and taking away their magic is powerful. Being magicians is who they are. So the others help in small ways—like leaking the location of Dylan’s hiding spot—while Lucas and I have been doing the rest.”

I clear my throat. “The best way to protect folks at the Victory Gala is to take Dylan down ourselves. We know where he’s going to be for once, so why not confront him?”

Everyone stares at me like I’ve lost my mind.

Elsie whimpers. “Quinton and Magnus are world-class Special Agents, and even they won’t confront Dylan head-on. What chance do we have?”

“I’ve beaten him before,” I say. “He thinks I’m helpless without my magic, but I’m still a Junior Agent and I’ve still got my Stun Stick. It’ll take some luck, but I can do it. It’s the only sure way to end this once and for all.”

Hannah looks even more impressed than before. “I was thinking more along the lines of pulling a fire alarm to get everyone out. But if you’re serious, there’s something you ought to know. Something I wasn’t going to mention because I didn’t want to scare you.” Her expression turns grave. “There’ve been whispers that the mural has already helped Dylan locate one of the Wonders. That he’ll be looking to demonstrate the power of anti-magick during the Victory Gala.”

That’s when Lucas steps forward. “As much as we want your help with this, give it some real thought. Everything we’re doing is extremely

dangerous, and if you fail, there's a chance you guys could end up in that anti-magick blast too."

A glance at my friends shows me that Hannah's warning has hit home. And seeing their fear stirs up my own.

Lucas hands me back my phone. "Talk about it and let us know tomorrow morning what you decide. There's no shame in wanting to stay safe. We just thought you deserved to know what was going on."

"Thanks," I say.



ME AND MY FRIENDS AGREE TO THINK ABOUT THE VICTORY Gala separately, and then meet up in the basement to talk it out first thing in the morning. So I spend the rest of the day calling and texting and even leaving voicemails for Quinton. But I get no reply. He and Magnus must be someplace with no signal, or maybe they've just ditched their burner

phones to focus on the mission. Whatever the reason, it's driving me up a wall.

If they're still after Harlowe, then it makes sense to make the arrest at her Victory Gala. But that also means there's a good chance they'll get caught up in Dylan's attack. The thought keeps me up. Even if my friends decide to stay, I'm going—if I can help in any way, then I've got to try.

When morning finally does come, Mrs. Chamberlain is waiting by the attic stairs to request Elsie's assistance in preparing what is sure to be another not-so-tasty meal. Something about the stove being difficult and needing Elsie's fire-breathing to heat the pots; apparently Mrs. Chamberlain's ghoulish flames can spoil the flavors. So I head to the basement to let Jayden know what's going on.

I still haven't gotten a response from Quinton, and I couldn't be more annoyed. The house must be getting bored with trying to spook me because the only run-in I have is with grumpy Mr. Chamberlain, who sees my sour expression and promptly stomps away, saying, "And I thought *I* was in a mood."

"Anything from Quinton on the computer?" I ask Jayden when I reach the basement.

"Nah," he says.

"Even if he meant to leave me behind," I say, "why make it so I can't even get in touch? What if we were in trouble and needed him?"

Jayden frowns and gets to his feet. "I know you and Quinton ain't on the best terms right now, but don't let it mess up y'all bond. Y'all love each other, you know?"

"I know." I try my best not to let a smile crack through.

But Jayden sees it anyway. "Bull's-eye! Gotcha right in the heartstrings, didn't I?"

"You're such a dork." I grin.

He suddenly looks nervous and fidgety. "I just really care about you."

"Same," I say. My cheeks start to burn like crazy.

"Uh, you know, like a good friend and stuff," he adds quickly. "Yeah, that's what I meant."

"Right," I say. "Friends."

Jayden blushes and steps away from Elsie's computer. "Everybody talkin' about the Victory Gala tonight. It's all over Eurg."

I sit down to the computer and log into my own Eurg account. Not knowing what else to do, I scroll through the Top Posts. They're all from supernatural celebrities declaring how excited they are to celebrate the brave men and women of the Bureau at tonight's Victory Gala.

Lady Duboise has the number one spot on the trending page—she's previewing her outfit for the event, which is literally a pillowcase with *Don't Sleep on the Bureau* stitched on one side and *Frozen, not Forgotten* on the back. It's in honor of both the Bureau and all those still trapped inside the Congress Room.

Influencer Bianca the Banshee wails on a livestream about how awkward it's going to be if she runs into her royal, and even more famous, ex, the Goblin Prince. When a viewer comments that she could always stay home, the banshee scoffs, saying anyone who's anyone will be in attendance.

Even the Fairy Football League has canceled its games for the week to allow players to attend.

No one seems to realize the danger they're putting themselves in. So I do the only thing I can think of, and type up a quick warning:

**THE VICTORY GALA ISN'T SAFE
PLEASE STAY AWAY!!!**

But when I go to post it, an error message comes up.

**ERROR! YOUR ACCOUNT HAS BEEN DISABLED
Please message Tech Support for assistance.**

This has gotta be Harlowe's doing. I click on the messages icon, prepared to let Eurg know just what I think of them caving to Harlowe's request, but I'm distracted by the fact that I have 12,917 unread messages.

Most are from random accounts saying how much I stink and how they hope Harlowe makes me pay for siding with the magicians. It's clear her smear campaign against me is working. Thankfully there are also some supportive ones from folks who don't believe Harlowe's lies.

I go completely still when I see new messages from @The_Lara_Van_Helsing  in my *Supernaturals You're Following* list.

There are two—one from yesterday and another from the day before. I click on the first, and a video pops up onscreen. It's Lara in her Junior

Agent uniform. She looks shell-shocked, as though she's in a daze. Her face is so close to the phone, I can't tell where she is.

"I don't know if you'll get this or not, but I hope you and Elsie are someplace safe. I don't understand what happened. I remember going with you to the Congress Room to find the time stone, but everything after that is fuzzy. Harlowe and my dad said that you and Elsie are traitors, that you were trying to steal the time stone for yourselves. But that doesn't make any sense. I remember why we went there, and it was to stop the time freeze. I think Harlowe somehow made me forget what happened after. I just want you to know that I don't believe anything they're saying. Wherever you are, be careful. Harlowe's out to get you."

My heart is beating so fast I feel sick. It's all I can do not to throw up. Because we left Lara behind. *I* left her behind. Elsie would tell me I didn't have a choice, but it doesn't make me feel any better about what happened.

I click on the second video, and this time Lara's in a huge, fancy bedroom that looks like something from those million-dollar real estate shows that Mama watches sometimes. Lara looks more like herself this time, wearing a trendy dress fit for a runway. She's got her hair and face made up, but her expression is just as miserable as in the last video.

"You never answered my last message, but I have to tell someone what's going on. So, um, I think Harlowe can control people? There are these times when, like, I'm not fully in control of what I'm doing. It's like I'm sleepwalking—no, like I'm riding in the passenger seat of my own body. And it always happens when Harlowe is around. No one else seems to believe me, and I don't know what to do. Wherever you are, stay far away. And if you ever get a message saying to meet me somewhere or that Harlowe isn't so bad, it's not me. Don't come—"

Lara is interrupted by a phone ringing. She picks it up and her eyes go wide. She glances at the camera and mouths, "It's her—Harlowe."

She shudders but still answers. *"Hello?"*

It must be a video call because she holds the phone up to her face.

"Lara, dear," comes Harlowe's voice through the phone speaker. *"I was saddened to hear from your father that you won't be attending tomorrow's gala. I had so looked forward to having you there. It's important for the public to see that I have the full support and gratitude of all our most influential celebrities. The teen demographic can be tricky, and I was hoping you could help me with that."*

“I—I’m so sorry,” Lara stutters. “I’ve just been feeling a little under the weather.”

“You poor thing! And yet you’re all dressed up—cute as a button! Maybe it’s not as bad as you think.”

“M-maybe—but I wouldn’t want anyone else to get sick.” Lara looks down at herself. *“And I always dress up when I’m not feeling well. You know what they say, if you look good you feel good.”* She tries to smile but it’s not very convincing.

“Well, how about you come anyway, okay?”

“B-but—”

Harlowe’s voice turns harsh. *“I said, you are coming to the gala tomorrow night no matter what. Understood?”*

I watch as Lara’s face goes slack, her eyes glazing over. It’s not much different from how Mama looked after being zapped by the memory remote. I feel just as unsettled now as I did then.

Then Lara smiles. *“Of course I’m coming to the gala tomorrow night, Director Harlowe! I can’t wait!”*

“And wear something beautiful, something befitting the Van Helsing name,” Harlowe adds. *“On second thought, forget what I just said. It would be better to demonstrate to the world that even your family serves me. You’ll be on duty with the rest of my Junior Agents.”*

“Yes, ma’am.” Lara salutes and then hangs up the phone. For a moment, she just sits there, her cheery smile fading into confusion. Then she shrugs and reaches over to shut her laptop, ending the video.

I grab Jayden by his arm and dash out of the basement. I don’t stop until I find Elsie in the kitchen doorway.

“Your aura,” says Elsie. *“What’s wrong?”*

“Harlowe is using her ability to make people go to the gala—I literally just watched her do it to Lara,” I say. *“Even worse—that awful lady doesn’t even need to be in the same room to be able to control people. She can do it over the phone.”*

Elsie just stands there, stunned. *“So what do we do?”*

I take a deep breath and try to look confident in what I’m about to say. *“I want to rescue Lara.”*

Elsie pales. *“But how? We don’t even know where she is.”*

“True,” I say. *“But she’ll be at the Victory Gala tonight. And so will I.”*

The corner of Jayden's mouth lifts and he shakes his head. "Like there was any doubt."

Elsie frowns. "What you're asking is the right thing to do . . . and you know we've always got your back. But that place could turn into a battlefield. I don't want to see one of us get hurt."

"It might be dangerous," I admit. "And I'm willing to go alone. But if comes down to rescuing Lara, protecting the guests, or confronting Dylan, I don't wanna have to choose. I'll need help. The way I see it, that's three things we need to accomplish and there are three of us."

Jayden throws an arm around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze. "You know I'm comin'."

I can't help smiling at his enthusiasm. That boy really would follow me anywhere.

"Els?" I ask.

My best friend blows out an anxious breath. "People are depending on us, huh?"

"Yep," I say.

Elsie nods and stands a bit taller. "Then maybe it's time I start being brave. Truth is . . . I have actually given this some thought—couldn't help myself. We all agree the best way to protect the guests is to clear the place out before Dylan can attack, right?"

"Right," I say. "Hannah suggested pulling a fire alarm, but I'm worried people will ignore it. Or Harlowe will just deactivate it before anyone actually leaves."

Elsie grins a little. "What if a dragon crashed the party?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

My best friend takes a step backward and holds out both arms. Dark scales break out across her hands, replacing her tan skin. The scales travel up her arms and spread across her shoulders before descending over her chest and torso. The strangest part? They replace her T-shirt too, the fabric tucking in behind the interlocking scales until she's a literal dragon from neck to waist.

"Whoa," says Jayden. "How long you been able to do that?"

Elsie beams. "I've kinda been practicing on my own since yesterday. That first big transformation was a real breakthrough. It's like my body just knows how to do it now."

“So you can shift on command?” I ask.

She nods. In an instant, the scales begin to retreat until my best friend is her normal self again. “In theory, I can probably even control how big I get.”

“Then we’ve got a plan,” I say excitedly. “Jayden and I can look for Lara, and once we’ve found her you can go full dragon and scare guests into going home before Dylan can attack.”

“That could work,” says Jayden.

“It’s worth a try,” says Elsie. “But what if Dylan shows up anyway? Lucas said it’s the Prime Minister he plans to deal with once and for all.”

“Then I do my best to stop him,” I say. “Hopefully Quinton and Magnus and others will be there to confront him too.”

Hearing that I may not have to face Dylan alone seems to relax my friends a bit.

“Jayden,” I say, “message Lucas that we’re in.”

He nods and pulls out his phone.

We don’t wait long for a reply. Jayden reads it off. “‘Great news! How are you guys getting into the gala?’”

Elsie frowns. “There is the whole *we’re not invited* situation to think about, huh?”

“Lucas and Hannah did pretty much leave that part to us,” I say.

“I mean”—Jayden looks around the basement—“ain’t the Chamberlains like a big deal or something? Maybe they got an invitation?”

“Yes!” I say, perking up. “I bet they did!” The Chamberlains were major back when they were alive, and their name means even more now as one of the undead community’s most respected families. Mrs. Chamberlain is an actual celebrity.

So we set off to find her. In the hall, we run into Peek-a-Boo instead, who quickly blows himself up like a balloon and bursts into pieces. He puts himself back together, only to demand yet another favor in exchange for his mom’s whereabouts. But when Elsie literally growls at him, black smoke fuming from her nostrils, he quickly relents and tells us Mrs. Chamberlain is in the cemetery visiting her mother.

From the nearest window, I spot a little stone walkway leading back to the graveyard we crossed on the way here. I didn’t notice it then, but the area looks suspiciously dark, as if it’s permanently in the shade.

Mrs. Chamberlain is crouched in front of an elaborate gravestone, beneath an umbrella.

“Outside can’t be nearly as scary as here in the house,” Elsie asks, “can it?”

“We’re about to find out,” I say.

There’s a side door leading outside, so we take it and follow the path to where Mrs. Chamberlain is sitting, tiny flames shivering on her arms and neck. “Hello, children. Haven’t seen you three outside before. Mother says hello.”

A bony hand protrudes from the dirt in front of the nearest gravestone and waves to us. We all wave back.

Her headstone reads:

**Here Lies Tabitha Yeast
Pardon Me for Not Rising**

I spent the trip down thinking of how to ask about the invite in a not-obvious way. But I’ve got nothing, so I just come out with it. “Mrs. Chamberlain, we were wondering if maybe you got an invitation to the Victory Gala tonight?”

“Of course!” Mrs. Chamberlain looks offended. “Imagine putting together a VIP guest list and leaving my name off.”

“Could we . . . maybe have it?” I follow.

The ghoul raises an eyebrow. “Why would you want that, unless . . .” A wicked smile plays over her lips. “Are *you* planning to attend?”

“It’s our friend,” says Elsie. “She’s going to be there, and we’d like to get her out before anything bad happens.”

“Such as?” asks Mrs. Chamberlain.

“We think magicians might attack,” I say.

Mrs. Chamberlain folds her arms. “And should that happen—who’s going to get you three out? I don’t suppose Quinton knows about this little plan of yours?”

We don’t have an answer for that.

Finally I say, “We’re willing to do whatever it takes.”

Mrs. Chamberlain squeals with delight. “How positively splendid! As I always say, what’s the point of having a life if you don’t put it on the line from time to time?”

Elsie steps forward, incredulous. “You’re really going to let us go? Even though Quinton entrusted you with our safety?”

“Safety schmafety!” says Mrs. Chamberlain. “Besides, I told Quinton that you all could stay here, not that I’d play babysitter. What matters is following your heart—wherever that may lead. Heavens, by your age I’d already run off with a traveling circus, joined a merry band of train robbers, and made my own fortune during the California gold rush. That’s where my father finally tracked me down.” She grins, her eyes full of memories. “Those were the days.”

“Sound like you done it all,” says Jayden.

Mrs. Chamberlain gives him a wink. “Everything I could get away with. Now then, let’s get you three dressed. Can’t attend a gala in any old thing. Even Mama agrees!”

“She does?” I glance at the gravestone again, and that skeletal hand shoots back through the dirt, this time giving us a thumbs-up.

Mrs. Chamberlain claps her hands. “Everyone to my closet. Chamberlains dress to impress!”

There are walk-in closets and then there are get-lost-in closets. Mrs. Chamberlain definitely has the latter. I could fit my entire apartment inside this place. It’s one of the only areas of the house untouched by the fire, though all the old clothing is long gone. But that doesn’t mean it’s empty. Every inch is covered in the latest undead fashions, from Lady Duboise’s shimmering *Dead But Dazzling* line to Vivi LaBoom’s *Till Death Do Us Party* collection.

“First things first,” says Mrs. Chamberlain. “Who’ll be posing as me?”

No one volunteers.

Mrs. Chamberlain looks amused. “Impossible shoes to fill, I know. After all, you simply cannot buy this level of class and elegance. So I’ll ask a better question—which one of you has the most confidence?”

Both Elsie and Jayden point to me. I want to disagree, but this whole thing is my idea, so I go along with it.

“Good.” Mrs. Chamberlain turns her attention to my friends. “And since neither of you is quite large enough to pull off being my husband, we’ll make it seem like I’ll be attending the gala alone as PR for the show. That means one of you will pretend to be Fabiola, my personal assistant, and the other will be Raymond, my security detail.”

Mrs. Chamberlain starts with me. She brings me over to one side of her closet and flips through some very fancy-looking coats.

“Uh, Mrs. Chamberlain?”

“Yes, dear?”

“It’s the middle of summer. It’s too hot for a jacket.”

Mrs. Chamberlain pinches my cheek and grins. “Spoken like a girl whose heart still beats. Let’s just say death has a way of turning everyone it touches ice cold.”

I nod and she pulls out a long jacket so dark I can’t tell if my eyes are open or shut when I look at it.

“I forgot I had this!” Mrs. Chamberlain coos. “A genuine Miss Abyss. She was Lady Duboise’s mentor once upon a time. They simply don’t make them like this anymore. Should be useful for hiding if it comes to that.”

As Mrs. Chamberlain wraps the jacket around me, it feels like I’m wearing a shadow. It makes me think of Dylan and the shadows he can conjure, and I can’t help a shiver. We braid my hair down and Mrs. Chamberlain plops a bright red hat on my head—it looks like something a grandma might wear to church. After adding a thick white scarf and matching shades, you can barely see any of me at all. Which I guess is sort of the point.

Next Mrs. Chamberlain pulls out a makeup kit labeled *A Brush With Death*. Inside are ghostly shimmers of every color.

“Even the most glamorous ghost can find her glow a bit dim at times,” she says, grabbing a makeup brush.

Jayden chooses a bright blue color while Elsie picks a lime green. And by the time Mrs. Chamberlain is done with them, they’re as ghostly looking as any undead I’ve ever seen.

Mrs. Chamberlain uses Hermes Instant Delivery to purchase a dark suit for Jayden and a skirt suit for Elsie. I can’t help but laugh—they look like businesspeople. As we all stand in front of the mirror, for the first time I start to think maybe we’ll be able to pull this off.

Maybe.

Next Mrs. Chamberlain has me practice her walk. I never realized, but she’s got this certain way of moving that’s hard to copy.

The ghoul has the best time watching me try. “Poor little thing, you’ve barely got any hips to pull off my strut! It’s a good thing they’re hidden by

that jacket! You're going to have to exaggerate your walk, otherwise people will know it's not me."

I try again.

"Chin up!" she commands. "You must capture the art of seeming uninterested in anything happening around you. As if no one is worth your time. If you can do it right, then you won't have to speak to anyone!"

I practice for what seems like forever, until she's satisfied and declares me an honorary junior Mrs. Chamberlain.

We decide to wait in the closet until it's time to leave in case Quinton comes back early. If he gets even a hint of what we're planning, he'll shut it down immediately. So we just hang out.

By the time evening comes, we're all feeling anxious. I feel around in my pocket for my Victor's Ring, giving it a squeeze for good luck. The jolt of magic does wonders for my nerves.

Mrs. Chamberlain brings the invitation with the instructions on where to go once we arrive. We had intended to ask for another of the family's transporters, but the invitation says it will act as a temporary transporter to and from the event. No other teleportation will be allowed.

"Well, children." The ghoul gives us a dramatic salute. "Best of luck to you all! I hope tonight goes well. If you do die, you can always spend the rest of eternity here with us. Although I wouldn't recommend going by fire. There's no way you'll pull it off with as much panache as I have!"

We're really about to do this. Sure, I've snuck into places that were considered off-limits before, like the Congress Room, but even that doesn't feel quite as daring as this does. For one, we didn't have to fool anyone once we got there. It was just teleport in, search like crazy for the time stone, and get out before anyone else showed up. But this is going to take a lot more than that. I'm going to have to convince folks I'm really Mrs. Chamberlain.

Because if I don't, we'll be brought to Harlowe, and I don't even want to guess what might happen then.

"Amari?" Elsie asks.

"Yeah?" I can hear the worry in her voice.

"I hate to bring this up, but I just thought of something. Now that you've lost your magic, does that mean you aren't immune to Harlowe's mind control anymore?"

"Oh," I breathe. "I didn't think of that."

But before we can discuss it any further, sparks of gold glitter shoot from the card, exploding to form words in the air.

*We await your arrival at the Victory Gala!
Please press the button to activate your temporary
transporter.*

“Jayden,” I say, waving him over.

He jogs over from the other side of Mrs. Chamberlain’s massive closet. “It’s time?”

I nod and turn to look at Elsie, her question about Harlowe hanging between us. I’m stepping into even more danger than I realized.

Still, I shake off my nerves and say, “Both of you—wrap your arms around mine.”

Jayden and Elsie do just that.

“Last chance to change your minds,” I say.

No one answers.

So I close my eyes and press the button.



MY SENSES GO INTO OVERLOAD THE MOMENT WE arrive on a winding road lined by tall trees. Voices, growls, screeches, and a ton of other sounds echo in my ears. There are a dozen different smells too—some nice, and others not so great. Paparazzi line the pavement, their camera flashes so blinding I have to squint to see what’s going on around me. It’s already so crowded, and more supernaturals appear out of thin air everywhere I look.

And not just any supernaturals—these are the most famous faces in our world. Up ahead, the Goblin King himself lumbers forward, twice as tall as everyone else, a violet cape floating behind him matching the velvet crown atop his hairy green head. Screams ring out as rock stars the Shrieking Sirens appear in dazzling gowns with fishtail skirts that mimic their real-life mermaid tails.

I do my best to keep my cool as Lady Duboise passes by on a golden chair carried by four burly elf models with neatly trimmed leaves atop their heads. Her flowing rose petal locks flutter around a pale green face that already looks bored.

“Halt,” Lady Duboise calls, and they do. “A Miss Abyss, my goodness. How . . . retro . . . vintage . . . *fabulous!*” She bends down to take a closer look, then smiles and gives me a tiny wink. I can’t tell if she recognizes me somehow, but it doesn’t matter because she doesn’t hang around to chat. She commands the elves to carry her up the lane and they jog away with her chair.

Jayden gives me a nudge. “We gotta get going.”

“Right,” I say.

“Don’t forget to light your fires,” Elsie says.

“Dang it—I meant to do that before we left.” I reach inside the jacket and click on the fake flames from the Mrs. Chamberlain Real Housewives Halloween costume. It’s not nearly the blaze Mrs. Chamberlain usually has, but hopefully nobody cares enough to question it. Lady Duboise was a close call.

Once that’s done, Elsie and Jayden move to either side of me and the three of us power walk up the drive as if we own the place. If I weren’t so terrified of being discovered, I’d probably laugh. I can’t imagine how ridiculous we must look right now.

We follow the pavement around a bend to a mansion that’s so stunning I almost trip. It’s enormous, with glass walls that twinkle in the outdoor lights. There are so many balconies and doors and the whole place is

surrounded by rows of neatly manicured plant life. Fireworks go off overhead, brightening the evening sky and spelling out WELCOME! in large silvery letters.

“Whoa,” says Jayden.

“Whoa is right,” I say.

“This place is huge.” But Elsie doesn’t seem to share our awe. If anything, she looks even more nervous than before.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“How are we supposed to find Lara in a house this big?” Elsie asks. “Maybe I should shift now and end the Victory Gala before it even begins.”

“We can’t give up before we even try,” I say. “Besides, Lucas and Hannah will need time to steal the mural while Dylan’s attention is on the Victory Gala.”

“Right,” says Elsie. “Sorry.”

We follow the other supernatural celebs to the massive gate, where a squadron of agents are posted. They’re checking invitations. When it’s our turn, I cross my arms and wave Elsie in their direction as though I can’t be bothered to speak to them. Let’s hope they buy my haughty Mrs. Chamberlain act.

Elsie shuffles forward, adjusting her glasses. “Mrs. Chamberlain’s invitation.”

The agent barely looks at it. Instead he directs us to the Magic-Meters on the ground just beyond the gates. They must be looking to catch any magicians who try to sneak into the gala in disguise. Let’s hope they’ve also taken other steps to protect these folks.

I waltz over as though I’m annoyed to be asked to do anything at all, ever. When I step onto the Magic-Meter, I’m treated to a firsthand look at just how much magic I’ve lost. A powerful sinking feeling stirs in my belly. That scale used to say 100 percent magicality. But now it just reads 0.3 percent. It’s jarring, and for a minute I almost forget that I’m supposed to be in character.

“You two next,” the agent says.

I meet Elsie’s eyes. We don’t actually know how much magic she has. In addition to the 5 percent from the Crystal Ball, she’s also got some in her dragon’s blood. If the number on the scale is too high, they might get suspicious that she’s a magician in disguise. At the very least they’ll want

to ask her some questions. And once they find out who she really is, we're all in trouble.

"How *dare* you!" I shout in my best imitation of Mrs. Chamberlain.

Jayden covers his face to hide a laugh.

I get right up in the agent's face. "These people are with me! I got on your silly machine and proved I am no magician. To test them is to assume I enjoy the company of magicians, and that is an insult not only to me but to my family name!"

The agent sputters about protocol but I simply turn and start walking toward the mansion. I snap over my shoulder for Elsie and Jayden to follow.

They rush to catch up with me and we power walk even faster.

"*Bruh*," Jayden snickers under his breath. "Where you learn to do that?"

I shake my head. "Nothing makes you braver than being utterly terrified."

"I'm just glad it worked," says Elsie.

The three of us follow the long line through the enormous sliding glass doors at the front of the mansion and look around at all the supernaturals starting to fill the space.

"Let's split up before it gets too crowded," I say. "Remember the plan. Jayden, if you find Lara first, send us both a message ASAP. I'll do the same. Els, keep an eye out for a good hiding spot for a quick shift. As soon as we've got Lara, you get all big and scary and then we'll all meet here at the front door for a quick escape."

As the others start to move off, I reach out to grab their arms. "Be careful, okay?"

They nod, and then I'm alone, as Elsie finds a spot at the entrance of a wide hallway and Jayden hops onto an elevator full of leprechauns that carries him up to the next floor.

I move farther into the foyer, passing beneath a large crystal chandelier. As I whip my head back and forth trying to see everything at once, a pack of pixies float past my face. And then I hear a loud, "Ingrid! Darling!"

Suddenly there's a ghoul in front of me wearing a dripping-wet gown. She looks as if she just stepped out of a pool—she's drenched from head to

toe. From the sneer she gives me, I'm guessing she's probably the Drowned Dame—aka the Lady of the Lake at nearby Lake Lanier.

I step past her, pretending I didn't hear her speak to me.

"Oh, come now," she begins. "I thought we got past that little grudge of ours in season twelve?"

That little grudge was about her literally kidnapping Peek-a-Boo and holding him hostage over a Halloween party disagreement, but I can't even shoo her away because as another cast member of the *Real Housewives from Beyond the Grave*, she'd know Mrs. Chamberlain's voice too well. So I keep walking.

"Fine," she shouts after me. "Be like that. We all know who the press really came here to see!"

I keep moving through room after room, my eyes sweeping the crowd. But there's no sign of Lara anywhere.

I've just wandered into a secluded section of the house when I hear a voice that raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

"Excuse me? Are you lost?"

I slowly turn around to find Elaine Harlowe in a bright red gown. She's got on gold glasses and has flecks of glitter across her face and neck. I'd almost say she looked beautiful if I didn't know how ugly she is on the inside.

Could my luck get any worse?

A quick glance around the room shows me I've wandered into a small office. There are paintings of Lord and Lady Harlowe, the couple who found a young Harlowe in the woods. This must be her house!

And what's worse, this is her private space.

I turn and head for the door.

"Stop," says Harlowe.

And I do. Not because I want to—my body just obeys.

I try my best to run for it, but my legs won't work. Harlowe's supernatural control has locked onto me and it's all I can do not to scream. I was so focused on finding Lara that I wasn't paying attention to where I was going or who else might be around.

"Turn and face me," she says.

Again I'm forced to do what she says. I shiver in my Miss Abyss jacket.

"Who are you?"

I almost don't answer because I expect my body to just follow her orders. But then I realize—she only asked a question, didn't she? So I put on my best Mrs. Chamberlain voice and say, "Ingrid Chamberlain."

Harlowe brightens. "Ah! Yes, I could barely see you under all that clothing. I don't get to watch much TV these days, but I was absolutely riveted by season thirteen of *Real Housewives from Beyond the Grave*. The way you helped that dead orphan cope with her untimely demise . . . it brought tears to my eyes."

"I really must get going," I say.

Harlowe's smile turns strained and she steps closer. "Why the rush? Relax, enjoy yourself—this is a party!"

"I—"

"Take off those ridiculous glasses," she says. "Let's sit and chat a moment! I think you could really help me connect with undead voters."

My hand rises on its own, and my fingers shiver as I pull off the shades—

"Director!" a voice calls, and we both turn to the door. While Harlowe's not looking, I shove the shades back onto my face.

Harlowe darts a glance at me, looking annoyed. She opens her mouth to say something, but before she can Tristan Davies appears in the doorway, panting.

If Dylan and Harlowe weren't busy dragging the supernatural world into war, I doubt there would be anyone I disliked more than that kid. I'll bet he's still not over me earning this summer's gold star for Supernatural Investigations instead of him.

"Director," he repeats. "I found Elsie Rodriguez—she snuck in wearing a disguise."

My heart skips a beat. *Please, no.* My best friend is in trouble. Which means so is everyone else—we can't clear out the gala without our dragon.

Excitement sparks in Harlowe's eyes. "Excellent! I'll bet her little friends are lurking around somewhere too. Go fetch Agent Fiona. If we can get a look into Miss Rodriguez's intentions, we should be able to find out what they're up to."

"Yes, ma'am." Tristan turns and jogs away.

Harlowe turns back to face me. "Forget what you've just heard and go back to the party." Her grin turns wicked. "Enjoy the festivities. Understood?"

“Understood,” I say. “I’ll forget everything I just heard.”

She leaves and I immediately sprint for the other door to save—

To save who exactly? Someone’s in trouble—at least I think they are. My head has gone fuzzy. Why did I come in here again? I stand in the hallway, rubbing my forehead. I’ve forgotten something important, I just know it.

The last thing I remember is taking these back hallways to look for Lara—but it feels like there’s something even worse happening. Except the thought won’t stay in my head long enough for me to remember what it is.

Instead I just feel anxious, my heart threatening to beat right out of my chest.

My phone buzzes.

New Text Message from Jayden:

**No Lara upstairs. Heard a server say Junior Agents
been stealing food from the kitchens. Check it out?**

I might as well focus on why I’m here. So I follow a server through the house to an enormous gourmet kitchen full of supernaturals in pristine white uniforms. Celebrity chef Maximillian De Cuisine presides over a long row of steaming plates. The dwarf wears a hairnet over his unruly blue hair, and another on his waist-length beard.

At the opposite end of the kitchen, a couple teenagers in gray suits peek in from a side door. One of them just happens to be a blond girl with a smug grin I recognize instantly. I grab my phone and text Jayden and Elsie.

My head goes fuzzy again at the thought of Elsie, but I shake it off.

From Amari:

Found Lara. Els do your thing!

I dash across the kitchen, pulling my Stun Stick from inside my jacket just in case.

“Get out of here!” screams Chef Maximillian. “Can’t you see I’m trying to cook!” His raised voice is enough to spook the Junior Agents at the other door and they run into the hallway, giggling.

“Lara!” I shout.

The girl freezes, turning to face me with narrowed eyes. I pull off my hat and shades, and her eyes go wide.

“Amari?” Lara asks. “What in the world are you doing here? And why are you dressed like that?”

“I’m here to save you, actually,” I say.

“Save me?” She shakes her head. “You’re a traitor!”

I skid to a stop. “You don’t believe that.”

Lara draws her own Stun Stick. “Everyone out!”

Chef Maximillian and the other kitchen workers don’t need to be told twice. They race for the exits.

I *really* don’t have time for a fight. Els is about to shift into a dragon and send everyone home, and Dylan could arrive at any moment.

Lara’s eyes don’t leave mine. “Harlowe told me how you betrayed us—you’re even worse than my brother.”

Great, Harlowe’s used her mind control to poison Lara against me too.

Without warning, Lara sprints toward me, her supernatural athleticism allowing her to close the distance before I can even think to react. She jabs the end of her Stun Stick against my throat. “Don’t make this hard, Amari. Just turn yourself in.”

I jump back to put some distance between us, but she swings out her foot to trip me and I go sprawling across the floor. She’s on me in an instant, pulling one arm behind my back and using the other to push her Stun Stick against my neck again. Her supernatural ability makes her too strong; I can’t break free of her grip.

“Okay,” I say. “I surrender. But please, hear me out—”

“What, no spells?” she interrupts in a mocking voice. “You put up a much bigger fight back in that alley last summer. I was kinda looking forward to a rematch, but going traitor has made you soft.”

“Lara,” I say, a scary thought filling my head. “You do remember we’re friends now, right?”

“Friends?” she scoffs. “You and me? Please.”

“You’ve got to listen, okay? You’re under Harlowe’s control. You’re not thinking for yourself.”

“Whatever you say.” Lara laughs, pulling me up to my feet but keeping my arms clutched behind my back. “Why don’t we go talk to Harlowe and see what she thinks?”

“Lara, *please*—”

I stumble, my belly doing a flip as the floor suddenly shifts beneath my feet. It feels like a bomb went off beneath us.

My heart lifts; that had to be Elsie. She's probably rumbling around in the great room in full dragon mode. At least one part of the plan is working.

The distraction is enough to free me from Lara's grip. As I reach for a countertop to balance myself, the floor trembles again, this time for even longer. It's almost like an earthquake—

Like what happened at Pemberley House.

"A-are you doing this?" Lara demands, fear clouding her expression. She aims her Stun Stick at my face.

"No." I head for the nearest window, dread making my legs feel heavy. Because I've got a bad feeling Elsie isn't behind this at all. Especially since there are so many screams coming from down the hall. This place is still full of guests.

When I get a clear look outside, I gasp. Lara is next to me in an instant, and her mouth falls open.

A long row of red cloaks stands waiting in the distance.

Magicians.



CLOUDS BEGIN TO SWIRL OVERHEAD, AND BRIGHT streaks of lightning flash across the darkening sky. Bears and wolves and other kinds of wildlife emerge from the trees. The ground beneath our feet becomes unsteady again.

This is bad. Like, really, really bad.

“How’s this possible?” Lara shakes her head. “Dylan’s been caught. The magicians are supposed to be surrendering. This is a *victory* gala!”

“About that—” I begin, when suddenly the lights inside the mansion begin to flicker.

Laughter echoes through the intercom system and I freeze. I know that laugh. And so does Lara.

She turns to me, confused. “Was that my bro—”

Bam . . . Bam! Bam! A wave of birds slam into the windows, one after another, until the glass shatters. Me and Lara cover our heads and duck behind the nearest counter as frenzied wingbeats and loud squawks fill the air.

The winged terrors make a total mess of the kitchen. Rows of plates are overturned and pots and pans go skidding across the floor, spilling their steaming-hot contents. In only a few moments, there’s food everywhere.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” I say as a wineglass flies past me.

But even with everything happening around us, Lara’s attention is elsewhere. “We’ve got to protect the guests,” she says, eyeing the hallway leading back toward the great room.

She starts crawling in that direction, but I grab her leg. Growling, she kicks me away. “Get off me, traitor!”

“Would you listen?” I shout. “I’m your friend, and I’m here to save you.” I don’t give Lara time to respond, but instead grab the cell phone hanging out of her pocket, though I nearly drop it when a screeching bird gets too close.

I manage to shoo it away. Then I find and press play on the Eurg message Lara sent me. Thankfully, my super-stubborn friend sits still long enough to pay attention. I don’t even mind when she snatches her phone back, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise as she watches herself being manipulated by Harlowe.

If Lara won’t believe me, she’s got to believe herself.

But she’s shaking her head. “Th-this is some kind of trick—an illusion! Harlowe can’t control people’s minds. That’s illegal magic.”

“I *know*,” I say, frustrated—what more can I do to convince her? “It’s why Merlin put a block on her ability. But with him trapped in the Congress Room, Harlowe is free to control whoever she wants. Do you think it’s a coincidence that she’s come out of nowhere to become our new Prime Minister?”

Lara’s quiet, and I think that maybe I’m finally getting through to her. But just as fast her eyes glaze over again. She flushes and hurls her phone

across the room.

“Hey!” I shout, reaching after it.

“You’re *lying*.” Lara’s expression hardens and she reaches for her Stun Stick. “Harlowe warned us what a fraud you are!”

A loud crash sounds in the distance, distracting Lara just long enough for me to get my hands around the end of her Stun Stick. We wrestle over it for a few seconds before she overpowers me, tossing me across the floor toward the oven.

When I finally stop rolling, I pull myself onto a knee and throw up my arms to defend myself from another attack.

But she doesn’t come after me. Instead I look up just in time to see her duck through the swarm of birds and into the hallway.

Winching, I rub the shoulder that took the worst of my collision with the floor. *Ouch*. The Miss Abyss jacket that Mrs. Chamberlain was nice enough to let me borrow is covered in food. I shrug it off.

And then grumble in annoyance. How am I supposed to convince Lara to leave the gala with me if she thinks I’m her enemy? Even showing her proof wasn’t enough to break Harlowe’s hold.

Then I remember that *I’m* the girl who left her alone with Harlowe in the first place. Me, Elsie, and Lara all went to the Congress Room to retrieve the time stone and put an end to the time freeze.

And it should’ve been all three of us who escaped.

I’ve got to keep trying. Though it’d be nice if I could avoid being bounced like a basketball next time.

I keep low to avoid the birds circling overhead and follow Lara into the hall, stopping just short of the great room to peek at what’s going on in there.

The place is full of panicking supernaturals, scrambling for their invitations so they can teleport back home to safety. Elsie must not have shifted. And she’s no longer in the hallway where I last saw her. What went wrong? I don’t see Jayden either.

But more than that, where is Dylan, and why is he giving these supernaturals a chance to escape? If this is his opportunity to show off anti-magick, there’s got to be something I’m missing. The thought makes me feel sick.

As frantic guests begin to blink out of sight, I spot Harlowe on the opposite side of the massive room, near a doorway leading downstairs. A

dozen agents come pouring out, Stun Sticks at the ready.

“Get out here and protect us!” Harlowe screams as monstrous shapes barrel through the sliding glass doors.

Bear hybrids! *Seriously?*

My eyes dart around until I find Lara with the group of agents rushing to fend off the beasts. Which, I mean, is noble and all, but also not helpful for my plan to get her out of here. Lara’s got no idea what’s coming.

The growling bears edge closer. It’s now or never.

I make my move, ducking through a huddled group of supernaturals to tackle Lara, knocking the Stun Stick from her hands.

We fall onto a sofa.

Lara turns around to face me, and it might be the angriest anyone’s ever looked at me in my whole life. “You again?”

I throw myself on top of her and reach for my own Stun Stick. “This is for your own good. Once we’re out of here, I promise this will all make sense.”

Lara grits her teeth and I know I’m in trouble. In a blur, she’s flipped me over so that she’s on top of me. Just like last summer, she’s got both my arms pinned beneath one of hers, leaving her with one free hand. But instead of bashing my face in like she wanted to do then, she grabs my Stun Stick and puts the tip to my neck.

“Please, don’t—”

Lara zaps me anyway, and my whole body locks up so I can’t move at all. I start giggling uncontrollably from the effects of the blast, which is absolutely *not* how I feel.

Lara grins, reaching into her Junior Agent jacket for handcuffs. “What’s that? Nothing clever to say? No witty Peters remark?” She flips me onto my back to put on the cuffs. “I’ll bet Harlowe can make you talk ___”

A sudden rumble from the floor quiets Lara and she glances around nervously. Even the agents who’ve made quick work of sending those grizzly hybrids into early hibernation stare down at their feet, visibly concerned.

Harlowe steps forward, frowning. “Someone get downstairs and check ___”

Glass shatters above us. With my limbs frozen, I can’t do anything more than shut my eyes as debris crashes down around me. Suddenly I

don't feel Lara's weight on top of me anymore. There's a collective gasp, followed by shouting. I peek through my eyelids. And now I want to scream.

Because floating into the building is a boy cloaked in red, a shimmering black Crown atop his head. It's Dylan—and this time it's not a dream.

He's really here. Once my heart remembers to beat again, it pounds so hard I feel the vibrations through my whole body. The trembling in my arms tells me the Stun Stick blast is starting to wear off.

Dylan hasn't seen me yet, so I drag myself as far away from him as I can. I don't stop until I'm safely behind one of the giant columns leading up to the balcony. From there I spot Harlowe standing, frozen, her eyes bulging behind her thick frames.

When she finally snaps out of her stunned haze, the faun staggers back. "How . . . ? You're supposed to be at the Smithsonian, trapped in a vault!"

Dylan turns to face our new Prime Minister.

Harlowe starts whistling wildly. The agents—including Lara—retreat to form a protective circle around her.

I bite my lip. *Please don't let her get hurt.*

"Attack!" Harlowe orders. And the agents take aim at Dylan, letting loose a barrage of Stun Stick blasts that fizzle, useless, against a swirling wall of flame. He follows with fireballs that explode against the floor, sending the agents below scattering.

Harlowe and the agents look rattled. The faun grabs the agent nearest to her and screams in the lady's face. "Get me some backup!" The agent nods and pulls out her phone.

If Dylan is worried about more agents showing up, he doesn't show it. He just smirks, amused. He hovers higher, carried by gusts of wind that send his bright red cloak billowing behind him. Harlowe barks another order, and as the agents fan out to surround him, he just laughs.

This is my chance. I flick on my Stun Stick and crouch low, ducking behind the grand piano. I keep moving and squeeze between two tall vases, positioning myself below Dylan, but out of sight.

I don't have to outsmart, overpower, or even out-magic him. I just need to wait for a shot to present itself. I've gotta be patient.

And maybe a little lucky too. Dylan's so high up and he's constantly moving to avoid Stun Stick blasts fired by the agents guarding Harlowe.

I take a deep breath and reach out with my Stun Stick so I've only got to press the button when the time is right.

When two agents run up the far wall in their Sky Sprints, Dylan lunges forward to meet them in midair.

Leaving his back wide open.

So I fire.

I almost don't believe it when the shot connects. As I watch, Dylan tenses up and starts to fall, so I take another shot. And another. Each finds its mark.

Dylan crashes to the floor and I rush over with the cuffs Lara tried to use on me. Only to find him sitting there, head tilted back in laughter.

Agents quickly surround him, each aiming a Stun Stick. More pop into view with each passing second.

"Did you really think you won?" A woman's voice comes from Dylan's mouth.

"Y-you're not Dylan." I shake my head. Another magician wearing Dylan's face.

More trickery.

"Where is the real Dylan?" I shout.

The illusion melts to reveal a middle-aged woman in magician's robes. "I'm merely the distraction, you traitorous wretch. Our new master is five steps ahead of you all."

The lights cut out, shrouding the room in darkness.

Every screen in the room comes to life, showing a smirking Dylan Van Helsing—the real Dylan—standing in the middle of the Congress Room. Merlin and other members of the Supernatural World Congress stand frozen around him, still captives of the time freeze.

Dylan steps forward—as a magician, he's immune to the time magic. But why is he there? I don't understand.

Until Dylan reaches between Merlin's fingers to claim a shimmering green gemstone. The time stone. But there's no way he's planning to set the Congress members free. So why—

I cover my mouth with a trembling hand as I begin to understand what's happening. Lucas said their orders were to "take care of the Prime

Minister once and for all.” Only Dylan didn’t mean the acting Prime Minister. He meant Merlin.

The Merlin whose time stone he’s just taken. It’s an item of incredible power.

Hannah warned us that Dylan had used the mural to locate a Wonder. What if he’s only just now come to claim it? What if . . . the time stone is one of the Wonders?

As if to answer, Dylan takes the stone in two hands, a silvery glow erupting around his fingers. According to Dr. Jekyll, taking a Wonder apart requires an extraordinary amount of magic. No one’s more magical than Dylan Van Helsing right now.

Still, his arms shake with effort until the stone finally cracks, a shimmer of blue light glowing inside. We wondered how Dylan would be able to destroy a Wonder and not harm himself, and the answer is so simple I could shout. Instead of breaking it apart completely, like what happened in the Kaman Project, he’s barely cracked it open so that anti-magick can only trickle out slowly and takes longer to explode. Dylan’s created a time bomb.

I shudder—I’ve never felt so helpless.

Dylan retreats, leaving the stone to hang in midair. A glowing portal appears long enough for him to step through—and then it’s gone.

I can only watch as the blue light leaking out of the Time Gem steadily grows, sending up more and more sparks and until finally, with a violent flash, it fills the room completely.

When the light fades, the Congress Room is empty.



THE LIGHTS FLICKER BACK ON INSIDE HARLOWE'S MANSION, revealing a room full of shell-shocked agents and guests. The remaining reporters seem to come to their senses first, timidly slipping out of hiding places to record the scene around them. Camera flashes follow.

And then more magicians crash through the windows.

Screams go up from the remaining guests. Someone fires a Stun Stick blast, and fighting breaks out everywhere I look as spells clash against gadgets and supernatural abilities.

A giant vase explodes and a piece of furniture goes flying over my head. I keep low to the ground, doing my best to stay out of the way while keeping an eye out for Lara.

An agent spots me and starts in my direction. After Harlowe's broadcast declaring me an enemy of the supernatural world, he's not going to think of me any differently than Lara does. So I duck back through the fighting and don't stop until I reach the other side of the room.

Unfortunately, my haste brings me right to the spot where a dozen magicians have surrounded Harlowe. Only Lara stands between them. I'm not surprised at all that Harlowe is enough of a coward to let herself be shielded by a kid.

But they're horribly outnumbered. After firing her Stun Stick a couple times, Lara's swept aside with barely a second glance.

"Lara!" I call out, racing to where I saw her land.

She's leaning against the wall, dazed from the hard fall. Her Stun Stick lies a few feet away so I grab it. By the time Lara realizes what's happening I've zapped her. "Sorry."

I pull out my phone to text Jayden and Elsie but hesitate. There's something about Elsie that I'm supposed to know. Something important.

"Stay back!" shouts Harlowe, cowering. She whips her head around for help but there's no one—even with the Bureau reinforcements, the magicians have pushed the agents to the edges of the room, creating a barrier between Harlowe and anyone who could help her.

"What's wrong, *Prime Minister*?" calls one of the magicians. "Nowhere left to run?"

"Please spare me," Harlowe begs. "I'll give you whatever you want! You can have the Bureau, I'll help you do it!"

"Oh, you're gonna do that anyway." A thin shadow surges forward, diving through Harlowe and knocking her unconscious. It's the same attack I've seen Dylan use against my friends.

With no one left to defend her, the nearest magician scoops Harlowe off the floor.

They're kidnapping her.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I yell, "Stop!"

Crap. No good deed goes unpunished.

The magicians turn to face me now, dark expressions twisting their features. Shadows swirl and flames spark. A tree breaks out of its pot, its

branches reaching for me.

As I take a few giant steps back, a commotion erupts behind me. I'm tempted to turn and see what's going on, but I'm not taking my eyes off these magicians.

But they stop short, startled, staring over my shoulder as if they can't believe what they're seeing. It's enough that I risk a quick glance—

Quinton! At the sight of my brother, so many emotions rush through me. As happy as I am to see him here, I know it means he's in real danger.

My brother and Magnus race along the ceiling in Sky Sprints, followed by two other agents in uniform. Several magicians turn to face him while the remaining agents stare in stunned silence. A few gnomes even cheer, which, given the overall numbers, might be a bit premature.

Quinton leads Magnus and the two new agents on the attack, the four of them disappearing into a crowd of red cloaks. Suddenly my brother's in the middle of the room, Stun Sticks in both hands. Magicians rush forward, but he dashes up a stone column in his Sky Sprints and takes to the air as he spins and twists, delivering shots over his shoulder or between his legs. Half the time he doesn't even look where he's aiming but he never seems to miss. It's like watching an aerial acrobat in midair. It's incredible.

A magician stumbles into me, breaking my dazed stare. Thankfully her attention is on an agent swinging a glowing sword, not on me.

I look around for any sign of my friends. I've got to get them out of here—preferably before Quinton notices I'm here too. I groan. Why can't Lara keep still for five seconds?

A magician leaps in front of me and I give him a quick zap with my Stun Stick, which sends him sliding backward across the floor.

But I don't see the magician behind me until it's too late. I whip my head around just as a hefty man with bear claws takes a swipe at my face. I scream, bracing for pain that never comes.

The claws connect with a wall of ice instead. Another figure in red grabs me by the wrist and pulls me after him.

Lucas! "I'm looking for my friends," I call out.

"Where are they?"

"The last thing I told them was to meet me by the front door, but that was before everything happened."

Lucas frowns but nods. "We'll look around, but we've got to hurry."

We keep to the edge of the room while the fighting rages on. Finally, I spot Jayden and Elsie coming up the stairs from the basement. The relief I feel at seeing them nearly knocks me over.

Me and Lucas have to fight our way to them. Lucas does most of the work—he may be just an apprentice, but his ice magic is on point.

Jayden spots us and waves his hand. At first I think he's telling me to come over, but the waves become more frantic, and I realize he's trying to warn me.

Something slams into my back and I fall hard on my face.

I turn over to find Lara and Lucas battling, her Stun-Stick-turned-sword versus his ice hammer—either of which could do serious damage if they managed to connect.

“Stop!” I shout, throwing up my hands. “We’re on the same side!”

Neither one hears me.

Using her speed to overwhelm Lucas, Lara delivers a kick to his belly that folds him up like a lawn chair. Almost in the same motion she swings her sword at me, so fast I don’t even see the thing until it’s already missed my face by mere inches. Which seems to surprise Lara just as much as it does me, and she stumbles off balance.

Lucas surges forward, placing an icy hand against the back of Lara’s neck. By the time she turns toward him, her face has gone snow white, her eyelids fluttering closed. She drops like a stone.

“No!” I get to Lara as fast as I can. Her eyes are still shut, and when I pat her face to try to get her to wake up, her skin is freezing to the touch. It’s like he didn’t just put the cold *on* her, but inside her too. Her breath is a foggy mist, as if she’s standing outside on a snowy day.

“I-is she a friend?” Lucas stutters, looking on. “I didn’t know. She was attacking you and I just reacted—”

“Just help me get her out of the way,” I say.

Lucas nods and we each hook an arm beneath her shoulders to drag her to the bathroom at the edge of the room. Jayden and Elsie both come over and I dig through my pockets for the invitation, only to realize I left it in the Miss Abyss jacket I shrugged off in the kitchen.

I shake my head in disbelief. “I lost our way home.”

Lucas leans in close, speaking just loud enough for us to hear. “Spatial magic, remember?”

“Great,” I say. “Just get us out of here.”

He draws a glowing circle, just like I saw him do back in Dr. Jekyll's front yard. On the other side of the portal, a room with metal walls appears. "Hurry, everybody inside."

We do as he says, with Elsie wrapping her free hand around Lara. I spend the next few seconds searching the battle for any sign of my brother. I find him at the front of the group of agents pushing the magicians back. He's giving orders and the other agents are listening.

Please let Quinton be okay.

I dash through the portal.

The metal room is much smaller than it looked from the other side of the portal. A couple beds are placed against the back wall, which has a dusty TV attached to it.

"Where are we?" Jayden pulls the door open, and the room explodes with sound as a subway train zips by, horn blaring. He slams it back shut. "Lesson learned. Don't go lookin' behind closed doors."

Lucas slumps against the far wall. "Hannah wanted us all to meet here. It was her idea for me to come for you guys."

I give him a nod, but Lara needs my full attention right now. We manage to pull her onto one of the beds, and Elsie kneels beside her. My best friend closes her eyes, and when she opens them again, they're a reptilian shade of yellow I've only ever seen once—the night she transformed into a full dragon to save me from Dylan.

But this is another half transformation. Scales ripple down Elsie's right arm, giving off steam as she wraps it around Lara to warm her up.

When she realizes we're all staring, Elsie flushes. "Another perk of being a weredragon. No biggie."

Lucas hangs his head. "I honestly didn't mean to hurt her. I was trying to protect Amari." He steps closer.

But Jayden blocks his path. "You done enough, don't you think?"

"Can you reverse the spell?" I ask. But as soon as the words leave my mouth I know the answer. If he could, he'd have done so already.

"Lara looks bad," I say. "Lucas, make a portal back to Chamberlain Manor. I'll wait here with you for Hannah."

Jayden looks unconvinced. "You sure that's the right call?"

I nod. "Trust me."

That's enough for my friends. Lucas creates a portal to the Chamberlain basement and they carry Lara through, leaving us alone.

Lucas taps his foot impatiently. "Hannah should've beaten us here."

"Do you think something happened?" I ask.

Lucas pales. "I really hope not."

The minutes stretch on. Now that it's quiet, the memory of what happened in the Congress Room plays out in my head again and again.

"Did you know Dylan was going after the Congress Room?" I ask.

Lucas shakes his head. "I told you everything we knew. We just assumed he meant Harlowe when he mentioned the Prime Minister."

I blow out a frustrated breath. "Last I saw, Dylan's magicians were hauling Harlowe away. So you weren't totally wrong." I cross my arms and meet his eyes. "Are you the only spatial magician?"

The question seems to catch him off guard. "No, why?"

"After Dylan set off the anti-magick in the Congress Room, he used a portal to escape. I'd never heard of spatial magic before meeting you."

Lucas sighs. "It's relatively rare magic, but there are two others in the League. Dylan probably used a man named Godric. He's the kid's biggest fan."

Just then, Lucas's phone buzzes with a text. As he reads it, his eyes widen and he quickly draws a portal to a public bathroom. Hannah appears, clutching her ribs. Her face looks swollen and tears run down her cheeks. As she stumbles into the room, Lucas rushes over to catch her.

"Hannah?" says Lucas. "What happened?"

"Need . . . to sit . . . down," Hannah mutters. "Not doing all that well."

Lucas speaks before I can. "Where's the mural?"

Hannah shakes her head. "Hexed. By Dylan, I think."

"What kind of hex?" Lucas looks her over, panic in his voice.

Hannah groans. "I don't know. But as soon as I touched the mural it was like an invisible ninja started knocking me around. Barely made it out of there."

The poor girl is covered in bruises. "You need to get her to a hospital," I say.

Lucas nods.

Hannah leans up. "Amari?"

"I'm here," I say.

"Don't suppose you had any better luck taking down Dylan?" she asks.

"He was never at the gala" is all I say.

Hannah manages a pained smile. “Just means we need to try again, right? We’ll get another chance.”

“You’re asking me to trust you,” I say. “But what you told me was wrong.”

“Dylan attacked the Congress Room with anti-magick,” Lucas tells her. “It was . . . bad.”

The horror on Hannah’s face goes a long way to convincing me that Lucas is telling the truth about not knowing Dylan’s true plans.

Hannah closes her eyes and blows out a slow breath. “I’m so, so sorry. I thought we were helping you.”

I’m quiet for a moment before I respond. “There are more Wonders out there for Dylan to find and rip apart for the anti-magick inside. Did you mean it when you said there’d be other chances to get this mural? That you’re not giving up?”

“Never,” Hannah says fiercely. “This isn’t the League I grew up in. I won’t watch Dylan change it into something ugly. We’re going to do whatever it takes to stop him from finding more Wonders.”

“Good,” I say. “Then consider me part of the resistance.”



I ONLY KNOCK ONCE BEFORE THE HUGE BACK DOOR OF Chamberlain Manor swings open.

“Come in, dear.” Mrs. Chamberlain pulls me inside and slams the door shut. The undead lady of the house then proceeds to turn all six of the locks.

“Is everything all right?” I ask.

Mrs. Chamberlain turns to face me, her expression solemn. I’m so used to her easy smile and cheery attitude that the change makes me nervous.

“Follow me,” she says, hurrying past.

“Mrs. Chamberlain?” I say, rushing to keep up.

“Merlin was a friend,” she says in a low voice. “A giant in our world. We’ll never see the likes of him again. A horrible tragedy what that Dylan did to him. And everyone else in the Congress Room too.”

“Y-you saw that?” I ask.

“The footage is all over the othernet,” Mrs. Chamberlain answers.

I lower my head, not knowing what to say. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, dear. Anyway, you’ll want to know there are conflicting reports from the Victory Gala. Some are saying magicians captured Harlowe, others swear the agents won the day. And I’m afraid your friend, the girl you went to find, isn’t doing so well.”

I swallow, letting the enormity of what she said sink in. Truth is, both those reports could be true. We saw the magicians take Harlowe, and Quinton and the agents could’ve forced the League to retreat afterward.

Could the fighting be over already?

A million thoughts spin through my head. Part of me wants to return to Harlowe’s mansion and make sure my brother is okay. But I also know he wouldn’t want me there, that he’d prefer I stay safe. I’m also worried sick about Lara. We went there to rescue her and she’s in worse shape now than when we found her. What if she never wakes up?

I follow Mrs. Chamberlain through the mansion, the lady of the house quickly dismissing any terror that dares to show itself. There’s no question who’s in charge here.

We end up back in Mrs. Chamberlain’s enormous closet, where Elsie and Jayden sit on opposite sides of Lara. A pile of Mrs. Chamberlain’s plushest jackets covers her, but they don’t seem to be doing much good. The girl looks every bit as pale as Mrs. Chamberlain. Cool mist is still coming out her nose and mouth every time she breathes.

I kneel and place a hand against Lara’s forehead. Her skin is ice cold.

“I think she’s in hypothermic shock,” says Elsie. “But it’s magically induced, and I don’t know how to help her. She needs a cursebreaker.”

Jayden frowns. “Kinda need the Bureau for that.”

“All we can do right now is make her as warm as possible,” says Mrs. Chamberlain.

The ghoul directs me and Jayden to a second closet full of thick furs and we pile those onto Lara too, until all we can see is her frosty face and blond hair.

I pace the room, anxious. I wish I knew how things ended back at the gala.

When I finally take a seat at Mrs. Chamberlain’s vanity, Jayden comes over.

“Nothing left to do now but wait—”

Agent Magnus appears in the doorway, his gray agent jacket in tatters. There’s a nasty bruise just above his frantic eyes, which dart around the closet until they find me. “Amari, I need you to come with me. I’ll explain everything when we get there.”

There aren’t many people I trust more than Magnus, so I say, “Okay.” But I quickly follow with, “First we’ve got to get Lara to Supernatural Health. She got hurt in the fighting.”

“Fighting?” Magnus repeats, scrunching his bushy eyebrows.

Me and my friends watch Magnus come to the realization that we must’ve been at the gala too. Against my brother’s orders. But he only nods and taps on his watch. “Emergency services, I’ve got an agent down at Chamberlain Manor. Requesting immediate assistance.”

“Copy,” says a voice. *“I’m alerting a team now. They should arrive in the next few minutes.”*

“Amari, we need to go,” says Magnus. “No time to waste.”

“Go on, child,” says Mrs. Chamberlain. “I’ll make sure your friend gets to the Bureau.”

I don’t know where Magnus is rushing me off to but it’s clear from his anxious expression that it’s important. “I’m ready.”

Me and Magnus lock arms and teleport to the hallway just outside the Congress Room. My breath hitches when I realize where I am. Seeing the place empty sends a bolt of sorrow straight through me.

“I wish you’d told me we were coming here,” I say.

“Sorry,” says Magnus. “Everything’s gone to the dump at the moment. We’re having to play things by ear.”

It wasn’t even a week ago that me, Lara, and Elsie came here thinking we could end the time freeze. Doing so would’ve solved everything. Prime Minister Merlin would be back in charge, ending Harlowe’s and Bane’s ability to wage war against magiciankind. And without that threat, the League of Magicians wouldn’t have been in such a rush to find a new leader. The Great Game could’ve been called off. Meaning Dylan never would have gotten his hands on the Crown of Vladimir.

But what we discovered was that Merlin himself had used the time stone to cause the time freeze and save his fellow Congress members from Bane’s attacking wraiths. Before we could expose him, Harlowe showed up and forced us to retreat—

Straight into the final challenge of the Great Game.

“Why are we here?” I ask.

Magnus cracks a weary smile. “Now that we’ve got the Bureau back, I reckon the supernatural world needs to hear your story. It’s time we clear your name and help folks understand what happened here.”

I nod. “It’s not a very happy story. And with Harlowe still out there somewhere, it’s not even over. What if she comes back?”

“Merlin wasn’t the only elf who can block abilities,” says Magnus. “And once the world understands what Harlowe was doing, the elves shouldn’t give us any trouble about getting it done. It won’t be an easy story to swallow, so we mean to have folks here to back you up.”

“You’re going to ask another elf to put a block on Harlowe’s power?”

Magnus nods. “If Harlowe ever shows herself again it’ll be the end of her mind-controlling days.”

Footsteps echo in the hallway behind us.

I turn to find my brother supporting his exhausted-looking partner. “Maria!”

Dark circles hang beneath her eyes, and it seems to take all her strength just to hold up her head. Worst of all, she’s wearing a prison jumpsuit like some kind of criminal. The sight makes me hate Harlowe that much more.

Maria manages a smile. “Amari, I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Magnus goes over to assist Maria, but his focus is on my brother. “You found where Harlowe was hiding folks?”

“We did,” Quinton answers. “Didn’t want to get your hopes up until I knew for sure—”

“And Fiona?” Magnus interrupts.

“Already recovering in Supernatural Health,” says Quinton. “We’ll get Maria there too once this is done.”

Magnus closes his eyes, tears welling in the corners.

Together they escort Maria to my side. It’s only then I realize they’re gathering around me. Like a wall of heroes.

At least until Director Van Helsing appears next, wearing his usual annoyed look.

My blood boils. He sided with Harlowe and Bane—no way should he get to pretend to be loyal now.

Director Van Helsing comes to stand on Quinton’s other side.

I can’t hold my tongue any longer. “You’re every bit as guilty as Bane and Harlowe,” I snap.

The Director scowls back at me. “I was under Harlowe’s control. Certainly nothing you perceived as being unfair was done of my own free will.”

“That’s just not true—”

“Drop it, Amari,” says Quinton. “Whatever happened is done, okay? We’re all on the same side now. And we’ve got much bigger fish to fry.”

“Fine.” It takes all my willpower to keep quiet.

“All right,” says Quinton, lifting his watch again. “Send in the press.”

Almost instantly, the hallway surrounding the Congress Room begins to fill up with supernatural world media. Cameras and tape recorders and even phones get shoved in our faces.

The hallway roars as questions are shouted at us from every side. But Quinton raises a hand for quiet and they all go silent. Everyone watches with rapt attention, as if whatever my brother is about to say is the most important thing that’s ever been said.

Quinton points into the Congress Room. “It saddens me to say this, but the supernatural world has been deceived by Prime Minister Elaine Harlowe. She told you the time freeze was the work of Dylan Van Helsing and the magicians. She even went so far as to blame my sister, who has again and again proven herself to be one of the most promising Junior Agents in our ranks. So I want you all to hear what *actually* happened from Amari’s own mouth.”

Every camera shifts to me. It's all I can do not to shrink from the attention. But I know it's up to me to speak for the supernaturals who can't speak for themselves anymore—for Merlin and everyone else.

So I tell them how the time freeze was not an attack, it was protection—the time stone was used by Merlin, our true Prime Minister, to stop intruders with traitorous intent. I tell them how it started with Harlowe and Bane's desperate plan to stop the Supernatural World Congress from granting UnWanted's equal rights. And that Merlin was counting on us to save them, and how close I came. Then I tell them how sorry I am for failing, as Quinton rubs my shoulder.

I end by letting the supernatural world know just how dangerous things are right now. Because they deserve to know the full truth. "There are other powerful items like the time stone, called Wonders, and they've got anti-magick inside them too. If we don't find them first, then Dylan can do what he did here again."

My words send the press into a frenzy, and they begin shouting questions all at once. My brother steps forward to answer them, and I gratefully step out of the spotlight.

Something hairy sticks out a microphone and asks, "With both Prime Ministers gone, and Dylan Van Helsing possibly in possession of even more anti-magick already, has any thought been given to negotiating a surrender?"

I ball my fists. What a ridiculous question. Of course we aren't surrendering.

But when I look to my brother, I don't see that same fight in his eyes. "We are currently without a leader and scrambling to put next steps in place. For now I can say this—we'll do whatever it takes to keep the supernatural world safe."

"Including meeting Dylan's demands?" presses a centaur. "He wants the Bureau disbanded."

Quinton shakes his head. "The Bureau's not going anywhere."

Once things are settled in the Congress Room, it's back to Chamberlain Manor for our goodbyes. When Quinton and I arrive, Elsie and Jayden are seated in the sitting room with Mr. and Mrs. Chamberlain. There's no sign of Peek-a-Boo.

"The house is going to feel so empty without you," says Mrs. Chamberlain, dabbing at her eyes. "It's been nice to have beating hearts in

the house again. You can be sure that our various haunts and horrors will miss you too.”

I don’t think our host’s very dead body is capable of shedding actual tears, but her performance is a nice gesture. Especially since her grump of a husband looks like he’d rather be anywhere else.

Mr. Chamberlain sits next to his wife, his arms folded. We’ve only been here a few minutes and he’s already checked his watch multiple times.

“The entire Bureau of Supernatural Affairs and I are grateful for your help,” says Quinton. “You came through for us when not many would. I’m forever indebted to you and your family.”

“Do you mind being indebted to us someplace else?” Mr. Chamberlain mumbles. His wife shoots him an elbow. “What? I’m missing my poker game for this.”

Mrs. Chamberlain gives him a look that could melt ice, and Mr. Chamberlain sulks in his seat.

I step forward and offer my own thanks. “My friends and I appreciate *all* your help. Especially you, Mrs. Chamberlain.” As far as I know, Magnus hasn’t told my brother about our trip to the Victory Gala, so I leave my thanks as vague as possible.

Thankfully Mrs. Chamberlain catches on and shoots me a wink. “It might interest you to know that Miss Abyss reached out just this morning about a potential brand deal. Seems I made quite the impression.”

“Wow,” I say. “What a coincidence, huh?” Elsie goes pink, and Jayden pretends to be not paying attention.

“Did I miss something?” asks Quinton, looking between us.

“Oh, nothing,” Mrs. Chamberlain and I say in unison, and we both smile.

“Well, look at that,” says Mr. Chamberlain, getting to his feet. “Time for you to be off.”

“Behave.” Mrs. Chamberlain jerks him right back down before turning back to us. “What’s next for you all?”

“We’re heading to the Bureau,” says Quinton. “With Harlowe gone, it’s time to turn our attention to stopping Dylan Van Helsing once and for all.”

“Is it safe to go back there in the middle of a war?” asks Mrs. Chamberlain.

“The businesses that the Bureau uses to conceal itself aren’t the Bureau itself,” says Quinton. “There’s no place better protected in the entire world. Though I can’t say the same for Atlanta as a whole. Bureau cities will likely see the worst of the danger. You and your haunts and horrors might consider finding a temporary home someplace else.”

“Well,” says Mrs. Chamberlain. “The great thing about being dead is you can’t die twice, I always say. So we’ll be staying put no matter what happens. But know that you all are welcome back anytime. I even packed some food for you to take with you!”

“Oh,” says Elsie, looking sick. “You really don’t have to . . .”

“Yeah,” Jayden adds. “You done enough already . . .”

“Nonsense!” exclaims Mrs. Chamberlain. “Just boiled a pot of fresh earthworms this morning!”

Her son pops into view, dressed in a shimmering school uniform complete with a little tie.

“Peek-a-Boo!” says Mrs. Chamberlain. “What’s got you in such fine attire this afternoon?”

The ghost lifts his chin proudly. “I’ve decided to take on my first official haunting.”

Mrs. Chamberlain gasps and I look between them, confused. An official haunting? Even Mr. Chamberlain looks interested in the conversation for the first time.

“Well, who is it, dear?” asks Mrs. Chamberlain. “Don’t keep us in suspense.”

“Jayden Daniels,” Peek-a-Boo says proudly.

Jayden’s jaw drops. “Huh?”

Elsie winces. “It means Peek-a-Boo will be coming with us. The Bureau honors all official haunting applications that meet the minimum requirements. The Department of the Dead will review the application to make a final decision but for now . . . you’ve got a new roommate.”

“Besides,” says Peek-a-Boo, “we had a *deal*, didn’t we?”

I can only wince as Jayden shoots me some serious side-eye.

“We’re going to have so much fun!” A wicked smile fills Peek-a-Boo’s face and he turns a menacing shade of red. “Give me a list of your enemies and I will wreak horror upon their lives!”

A sniffing sound breaks the stunned silence. It’s Mr. Chamberlain. “That’s my boy. Ready to unleash chaos and mayhem like a proper

Chamberlain ghost!”

Mrs. Chamberlain nods her agreement. “Your first haunting! Our little bird is finally leaving the nest.”

The two hug one another and Peek-a-Boo spins around, turning a bright shade of pink. “You’re embarrassing me!”

Even with Dylan’s attack weighing on me, the sight is enough to make me smile. “What’s wrong, Jayden?” I tease. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”



QUINTON TELEPORTS US TO THE DEPARTMENT OF Supernatural Investigations, where a crowd has gathered around the young elf who is supposed to inherit Merlin's title as Elf King. The elf stands with his eyes shut, his face tense with concentration. His tree-bark skin takes on a golden glow that seems to come from within.

"Oooh," says Peek-a-Boo, floating just above Jayden's shoulder. "Cool."

"What's happening?" I ask.

"A cleansing spell," Elsie answers. "The elf is wiping Harlowe's mind control influence from the entire building."

"I wanted you all to see this in person," says Quinton. "To show you why it was so important we get the Bureau back. This spell is one of the most impressive feats of magic you'll ever witness."

"Now that we *are* back," I begin, "I want to join the investigation into the Wonders. And I know you're going to say we're just kids, but Dylan could be on his way to finding the others right now. You need all the help you can get."

My brother eyes me for a moment and I wonder if maybe I was a bit too bold. I can already hear his excuses about Junior Agents making mistakes and how this case is too important to involve thirteen-year-olds.

But Quinton just nods. “Okay, Junior Agent Peters. What are you thinking?”

“Well, Special Agent Peters”—I hold in my grin to stay professional—“we know the mural Dylan stole from the Supernatural Smithsonian has information about the Wonders. It’s how he knew the time stone was one of them. I was thinking it might be smart to start with whatever files the Bureau might have about them—including Project Kaman. Who knows, maybe there’s a picture of the mural somewhere.”

“I can ask Director Fokus in Magical Science,” says Elsie. “See what she has.”

“And I’ll go to the Secrets Library in the Department of Spies and Secrets,” I say.

My brother nods, thinking. “You’ll need written permission for both. Once I’m officially registered as an active agent again, I’ll draw up the necessary papers. You’ll also be getting your old phones back now that the Bureau’s safe again.”

“Thanks for trusting me with this,” I say.

Quinton nods. “Of course.”

A pulse of golden light passes through the hallway, and all around us agents blink and shake their heads as though coming out of a trance.

“Welcome back,” Quinton calls. “Your minds are fully your own again. And we’ve got work to do.”

I’ve become pretty famous in the supernatural world—especially after I stopped Dylan from escaping with the Black Book last summer and was labeled the Good Magician. I’ve got over a million followers on Eurp and have gotten used to seeing my face all over the othernet as well as supernatural newspapers and magazines.

But there’s a huge difference between famous and full-on celebrity. Showing up at the Bureau with Quinton Peters is all the proof I need of that. The moment we arrive at the Department of Supernatural Licenses and Records to get my brother registered as an active member again, everything around us stops. People don’t just recognize Quinton, they are *excited*. Someone actually screams. There’s a rush to get closer, as folks fumble over their words, barely able to speak.

They ask him to take selfies. Or if they can call someone else to prove they’re in the same place as *the* Quinton Peters. A few people even ask if he’s really back—like he’s not standing right there in front of them. Others

reach out to touch his gray jacket as though it's the only way to prove he's real.

Me and my friends get pushed aside completely. Even the workers leave their booths to join the crowd. It's like if a movie star showed up at the DMV.

"This is wild," says Jayden.

"Wild is an understatement," I say.

"It's incredible." Elsie's got real tears in her eyes.

"Not you too," I say.

My best friend just shakes her head. "I know it seems silly, but this is what your brother means to people. It's the reason I have VanQuish posters covering my wall and why I'm part of the fan club. These are scary times with Merlin being gone and the threat of anti-magick on everyone's minds. Your brother being here gives people hope. He's our world's greatest hero."

"I get it," I say. "It's just strange because, to me, Quinton is my dorky big brother. I mean, I knew VanQuish is super famous, but this is on a whole other level."

Jayden continues to look on, before saying, "I don't remember people acting this crazy for Maria. Ain't she VanQuish too?"

"Well," says Elsie. "You've got to remember that Maria had already been outed as a magician by the time you guys met her, so you didn't get to see how it was before." She sighs. "And then there's the fact that Maria is a Van Helsing, the family who founded the Bureau. They've *always* been famous, so they feel kinda separate, almost untouchable, I guess?"

"I think I understand," I say. "You're saying people go bonkers for Quinton because he was just a merit kid who turned out to be amazing?"

"People like underdog stories," says Elsie. "Being great when you come from a whole family of greats is a lot less interesting. No disrespect to Maria, she's super amazing too. But for her, being great was kinda expected."

"Plus, it doesn't hurt that Quinton *really* seems to like being famous," I add.

Eventually the Assistant Director of Supernatural Licenses and Records arrives and lets Quinton cut the line to fill out his paperwork. A cheer goes up when he turns it in and the guy behind the desk stamps it for him to take to the Department of Supernatural Investigations.

My brother is still smiling when Whispers the elevator greets us on the way out. "GREAT TO HAVE YOU BACK!"

Quinton covers his ears, laughing. "You know, it's the little things you miss most."

As he escorts us to Supernatural Investigations, I'm surprised to see Junior Agents in the halls.

"I thought Harlowe sent all the kids home?" I say.

Quinton shakes his head. "Standard wartime procedure is for Juniors aged sixteen and above to report in to assist the adults. Parents can opt their kids out of serving, but typically most Bureau parents are here working too. So it makes sense to want their kids close."

"Is that why you brought us here," I ask. "To stay close?"

"Yes and no," says Quinton. "You three will be staying in the Bureau because Dylan has a special interest in you. As for why we're back in Supernatural Investigations, we need your testimony for tonight's War Council."

"War Council?" Jayden repeats.

"They're called whenever the Bureau considers going to war," says Quinton. "Not that there's been a need for one in the past seven hundred years. Normally they're just for show, to back whatever Merlin thinks we should do. But with him gone, the War Council is more important than ever. Maria and I, Director Van Helsing, our newly reinstated Chief Crowe, and a few other bigwigs will be gathering to decide how best to combat Dylan and the League of Magicians. And most important, how to manage the threat that anti-magick presents."

"I kinda thought we'd get to join you at the War Council," I say. "So we can tell everyone what we know."

"The War Council is who this video is for," says Quinton. "It's important for us to understand what's happening before the meeting starts. That way we can make decisions quickly. If there's anything we don't understand, then we'll call for you."

I guess that makes sense. We head to a briefing room, where a camera is set up. Quinton grabs three chairs for us.

Once the recording starts, me and my friends tell the entire story of how we came to find out about anti-magick. From looking up the Kaman Project on Elsie's computer to my trip to Dr. Jekyll's house.

As we speak, I watch my brother's expression go from shock to concern to extremely serious as we describe how destructive anti-magick can be. Even he didn't know the whole story.

When I mention Lucas and Hannah, Quinton looks uncomfortable. Once it's over, I go up to him. "Do you think the Bureau would be willing to work with the rogue magicians?"

"Not for me to decide" is all my brother says. "That'll be up to the War Council."

The main lobby of the Department of Spies and Secrets looks the most ordinary of any of the Bureau's major departments. There's a long wraparound counter at the center where a receptionist sits behind a computer, the department logo of a watchful eye emblazoned on the wall behind him. Glass tables and plush chairs are scattered around the space, where a few men and women in black suits chat and sip coffee.

When Jayden and I step off the elevator, a freckle-faced Junior Spy in a stylish black skirt suit stands to meet us. "A pleasure to meet you Junior Agent Peters and Trainee Daniels. I believe you're to meet with our Director. Do you have the necessary paperwork?"

I hand her the Confidential File Request from Quinton and she looks it over before saying, "Great. I'm Junior Spy Parker Penn. Before continuing, please be aware that all memories of your time here that do not pertain to your request will be erased upon your departure, understood?"

Me and Jayden both nod.

Junior Spy Penn beams. "You can't reveal what you don't remember, am I right? Just something we like to say around here." The girl turns but stops herself. "Almost forgot, it's our understanding that you've officially become haunted, correct?"

Jayden grumbles. "Yeah, but he's napping."

"Well," says the Junior Spy. "So long as he stays that way there shouldn't be a problem. Memory spells don't work on those without a physical brain." She turns. "Follow me, please."

"Uh, so where are the doors?" asks Jayden.

I glance around too, realizing there aren't any. But that doesn't mean people aren't going in and out of the department. A man sits down on a sofa that slowly lowers into the floor, while a lady tugs on a fern that causes a chunk of the wall to slide open, allowing her to step through.

When we reach the far side of the room Junior Spy Penn taps her toe against a tile, causing it to drop into a stairwell. It leads down into a fancy hallway with polished wood floors. And just like the lobby, there isn't a door in sight.

But Penn marches confidently forward, nodding at a group of Senior Spies who are invisible from the neck down. "Our Incognito Unit," she tells us. "They can stay unseen for months at a time."

We're led to a slightly crooked photo of Director Privy, a handsome guy who looks far too young to be a Director. As Penn straightens the frame, there's a loud click, and a handle juts out from the wall. "We're here. The Director's just inside."

I turn the handle, and a hidden door swings open to reveal a small office. Like the Operations Bay in the Department of Supernatural Investigations, there are monitors everywhere, each showing something different. If I had to guess, I'd say these are shots taken by spies out in the field.

Director Privy stands in front of his desk, his face buried in a book. He straightens at the sight of us. "Ah, welcome! Thanks so much, Junior Spy Penn. I'll take it from here."

"No problem, Director." The Junior Spy shuts the door behind us.

Director Privy places the book on his desk and picks up a folder instead. A very thin folder.

"I'm guessing there wasn't much in the file," I say.

"Incorrect," he replies. "There wasn't *anything* in the file. Merlin ordered all information regarding the mural destroyed."

My shoulders slump at the news. I was really counting on learning something here about the mural and the Wonders. Dylan's got a massive head start on us, and we're still stuck at the starting line.

"But I wouldn't have let you come all the way here just to tell you that," says Director Privy. "Follow me." He pulls on a book and the whole bookcase swings open to reveal a small wooden room with a mirror.

"Are there really no doors?" I ask.

"None, unless you count the vaults," the Director answers. "This is by design. We seek out, store, and if need be, *reveal* the biggest secrets in our world—indeed everything about what we do is on a very strict need-to-know basis. And so every section of our department can only be found if you know the precise set of steps to access it. Which bit of wall to knock

on, or what tune to hum when you've reached a dead end. It's said that no one has ever seen the entire department. Not even Directors."

"But what about the things we've seen?" I ask.

He smiles. "You won't remember any of it once you leave. Now then, all eyes on the mirror. Don't look away until I tell you, understood?"

Jayden and I both nod.

I keep my eyes straight ahead, staring at my own face in the mirror. Slowly the room in the reflection begins to change, the wood panels fading, and a metallic hallway takes its place. There's a sign written in glowing letters.

Hall of Secrets

"We're here," says Director Privy.

I look away from the mirror and sure enough, we're someplace new.

"Follow me," says the Director, and we trail him through a hallway lined with vaults of every size. Some are small as stamps, others as large as a house.

We follow the Director for what feels like ages until we reach a vault set into the floor. He kneels and opens it up, revealing another empty-looking folder.

"I don't understand," I say.

"Listen closely," says the Director. "This vault contains a file not from Project Kaman, but what came after."

"But Elsie said there was only one study of anti-magick. The Bureau wouldn't sanction any more."

"And your friend is correct," says Director Privy. "In the Congress Room, the whole world saw firsthand what the Bureau learned from Project Kaman. That the Wonders are marvelous inventions created with anti-magick inside, and if you break them apart, the anti-magick is released, exploding to destroy all the magic it touches. The Bureau was right to shut it down, though placing the full blame on Dr. Jekyll was incredibly unfair. But the story doesn't end there, I'm afraid."

"Then where *does* it end?" I get the feeling that despite his title, this Director really enjoys spilling a good secret.

Director Privy grins. "Merlin didn't destroy the Project Kaman files right away. Nearly a decade later, he sent them to the brand-new Director of Magical Science, curious to know if it was worth looking into again now

that the danger was better understood.” He opens the file to show me a single sheet of paper. “This is what that Director wrote back.”

I reach out and gingerly take the sheet of paper, holding it up to the light. And begin to read:

To Prime Minister Merlin,

It is my firm recommendation that all knowledge pertaining to Project Kaman be scrubbed, and the study of anti-magick be strictly forbidden. Given recent breakthroughs in magical mathematics, it’s my belief that one of the Wonders depicted in the mural you’ve sent may have the unique ability to stabilize the explosive properties of anti-magick. Simply put, a person with both the Wonder and this knowledge could wield anti-magick at will—and, in the wrong hands, destroy all supernatural life on Earth.

—Director Warren Ing

Department of Magical Science

I look up at Director Privy, mouth open.

The Director takes the letter and slips it back into the folder. “Every Director of Spies and Secrets is told, upon being sworn in, to refer to this vault should the subject of the Wonders or anti-magick ever come up in any meaningful way. We can only pray that Dylan hasn’t discovered this information on his own.”



WHEN ME AND JAYDEN MEET UP WITH ELSIE AT OUR room, she looks just as shell-shocked as we both feel. Apparently she got a similar story from Director Fokus. And since the Directors of Magical Science and Spies and

Secrets will both be attending the War Council, there wasn't any need to deliver the news to Quinton. Not that he's around anyway.

I send a few messages to Hannah and Lucas, asking them to call me ASAP. We've got to figure out how much Dylan knows, and those two are our best hope.

With not much else to do but wait for the ruling of the War Council, my friends come with me to visit Lara in Supernatural Health. But her dad, in true Director Van Helsing fashion, has made a list of people who are banned from seeing her. My name is at the very top. Still, the Junior Cursebreaker assigned to her unit lets us know that Lara's awake and improving, and he even carries a note to her.

Lara sends me an Eurg message soon after with a sleepy emoji and a thumbs-up. And THANK YOU in all caps.

Next we hit the food court. The whole "end of the supernatural world" letter did a number on my appetite, but Elsie insists that we eat something to keep up our strength. It's not like we ate very much back at Chamberlain Manor.

Thankfully, with so few kids here, we snag the rare trifecta of a hot dog, pizza, and a corn dog all in one meal. We scarf everything down happily and watch on Eurg Live as Quinton and Magnus lead a team to arrest Bane and his two remaining wraith lackeys, who were hiding in a warehouse downtown. If I thought the ten thousand viewers I attracted on Julia Farsight's livestream was a lot, it's nothing to the nearly two million who watch the raid.

My super-famous brother, who's already given a half-dozen interviews since he's been back, repeats again and again the truth of what happened this summer. That Harlowe was a fraud who used her supernatural ability to illegally take control of both the Bureau and the Prime Minister's office. And whatever my brother says seems to be gold. I've been tagged in more apology posts on Eurg than I can count.

I'm sliding my phone back into my pocket when I get an Eurg notification in flashing red letters.

**New Message from Luc_& _Hann:
Can you FaceTime?**

I show my friends the message. "I don't think we should do it here."

“We can always go to our secret meetup spot in Creature Control,” says Jayden.

“Good idea.”

From Amari_Peters  :
Okay. What’s your number?

We wait for a response before heading out.

New Message from Luc_& _Hann:
We’ll call you. Let us know when you’re ready

The three of us leave the food court and take Lucy the elevator up to the Department of Creature Control. Lucy asks about getting an autographed VanQuish poster to display next to her buttons, and Elsie promises to donate one of hers.

We slip through the lobby and into the Enchanted Gardens. The place looks as magical as ever, with bright, colorful plants that twinkle in the low light. One friendly shrub licks my fingers with its flower petals and then snuggles up closer to be petted.

When we reach a familiar patch of tall grass, I look over my shoulder and then step through to the small meadow. While Jayden turns back to make sure the grass looks unruffled, me and Elsie take seats beside the small pond where glowing fish swim up to have a look at us.

Once Jayden settles on my other side, I send the message that we’re ready.

My phone starts ringing immediately, and I tap the screen to answer. Lucas and Hannah appear onscreen. It looks like they’re sitting in the back of a car.

Hannah smiles and waves, while Lucas keeps an eye on their surroundings.

“You’re looking a lot better,” I say.

“Still a bit sore,” she replies, “but thankfully the hex is wearing off.”

“Hannah got lucky,” Lucas adds. “My guess is Dylan designed the booby trap for non-magicians.”

Hannah nods. “Doubt he ever considered that someone from the League might try and steal from him.”

“Of course not,” says Lucas. “No magician has ever betrayed the League. It’s how we’ve been able to remain secret for centuries. Anyone who displays a hint of disloyalty would be weeded out before they even make apprentice.”

“Aren’t you two scared of being caught?” Elsie asks.

Hannah nods. “Of course—but we believe in doing what’s right. We’re supposed to be fair magicians. But Dylan’s twisted everything. And now that he’s brought back the magicians Harlowe kidnapped, even more of the League is supporting him.”

“Is that why he took Harlowe?” I ask. “To get back the missing magicians?”

“Gotta be,” says Lucas. “But no one’s seen her since she was taken.”

“What we do know is that Dylan’s planning something awful.” Hannah nudges Lucas with her elbow. “Play it.”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his cell phone. After tapping the screen a few times, he holds it up to the camera.

A voice speaks. *“I’ve heard things about our new master. Curious things. They say the boy believes himself invincible. Claims he can lay waste to whole cities. That he means to make an example out of Atlanta. . . . Is any of this true?”*

It’s Cozmo’s raspy voice that answers. *“Dylan’s plans are his to reveal in his own time. But I will say this, if he is able to achieve what he’s aiming for there is truly nothing beyond our reach. And no one above our wrath.”*

A chill spills down my back. And I can tell from my friends’ faces they’ve come to the same conclusion. Somehow, Dylan knows about the Wonder that will let him wield anti-magick. Destroying entire cities? No one above his wrath? He has to know—but thankfully it doesn’t sound like he’s found the Wonder he needs yet.

Hannah frowns. “You see why we had to contact you. Dylan is calling a full League Dream Meet tonight to reveal what’s to come. He’ll be away from the mural, so we’re going to use this opportunity to go after it again. Thing is, missing another meet might blow our cover. Dylan might realize it’s us who tried to steal the mural. We’re putting everything on the line, so we could really use all the help we can get.”

I sit back, my mind racing. We can’t do this on our own. “Let me talk to my brother. He’s the best agent there is. The Bureau could help us—make sure this time we don’t fail.”

“I don’t like trusting agents,” says Lucas. “I don’t care if he’s your brother or not.”

“I’m an agent,” I snap. “And you’ve got no choice but to trust me. Especially if you want me to lead the League after we stop Dylan.”

“She’s right,” says Hannah, ignoring the outrage on Lucas’s face. “And we’ve already promised we’d ally with the Bureau if they’re willing. But we need an answer quickly. Because help or no help, we make our move tonight.”

As soon as the call ends, my friends and I race down to Supernatural Investigations, sprinting through the lobby and up the right side of the giant U-shaped hallway until we reach the Hall of Special Agents. Most of the doors are closed and locked, and the VanQuish office is no different.

“Shoot him another text,” says Jayden.

“I sent two on the way here,” I say.

“Are you looking for our famous siblings too?” comes a voice from behind us.

I turn to find Lara, in a blue designer jacket with matching beanie and gloves. I run over and throw my arms around her. “I’m so glad you’re all right!”

Elsie comes over next, and even Jayden joins in.

“If this gets any sappier,” says Lara. “Violins are gonna start playing.”

We all laugh and Lara grins at us, her teary eyes working against the smug “above it all” front she’s always putting on. She’s still pale, and there’s a visible mist every time she speaks, but I’m so happy to see her.

Lara clears her throat. “Before you say how fantastic I look for someone who nearly froze to death, I want to say I know what you did. You guys came back for me and made sure I got out. I, um, just wanted to say thank you. I really, *really* appreciate it.”

I grin. “I’m just glad you remember me now. ’Cause mind-controlled Lara tossed me all over Harlowe’s mansion.”

“Sorry.” Lara winces. “Were you guys looking for Quinton and Maria? They aren’t here, I don’t think.”

I blow out a frustrated breath. “It’s really important that we talk to them.”

“I just came from Agent Magnus’s office,” says Lara. “Can’t do much better than the Assistant Director.”

“It’s worth a try,” says Elsie.

“Let’s do it,” I say.

The four of us head farther down the hallway, allowing Lara to lead the way. I haven’t been to Agent Magnus’s office since he became Assistant Director earlier this summer. We take a left just before the glass walls of the Operations Bay, where rows of tables are positioned in front of the massive screens showing different missions being carried out around the world.

Magnus is just stepping out of his office. When he sees me, he gives us a once-over and says, “Take it you kids ain’t here to ask for wedding invitations?”

“Oh . . . uh, no, sorry.” I forgot that he and Agent Fiona were engaged!

“Don’t be sorry.” Magnus laughs. “It’s actually a relief. Daggum war being waged and all anyone wants to talk about is if we’ve set a date yet.” He sighs. “Reckon I get it, though. Folks want something happy to think about. Can’t much blame ’em for that.”

“We need to talk to you about something serious,” I say. “Could we go in your office?”

Concern sparks on Magnus’s face. “All right, then.” He types out a code on the keypad next to his door. There’s a loud click and the door swings open. “In you go.”

We file in, followed by Magnus. His new office is nothing like the old one, where every surface was covered in wood. This is all glass and steel.

Magnus leans against the edge of his desk and gives his beard a good stroke. His eyes meet mine. “Now, what’s this all about?”

So we tell him first about what we learned from Director Privy, and then about Lucas and Hannah’s plan. Magnus’s expression goes from slightly concerned to startled.

“Daggum situation’s worse than we thought,” says Magnus, his face red. “And you believe these apprentices? This could be a trap to draw out our best agents.”

It never occurred to me that Lucas and Hannah might not be telling the truth. Maybe because they’d seemed so desperate to have my help.

“I believe them,” I say. “It’s mostly a gut feeling, but one of them did save my life at Harlowe’s mansion.”

Lara raises an eyebrow. “He also nearly put me in a coma.”

Of course she’d mention that. I shoot her a look and mouth, “Not helping.”

“Sorry,” she says. “I mean, it’s possible I might’ve deserved it at the time.”

“Well, the War Council meeting’s in an hour or so,” says Magnus. “All the big shots will be there. If there’s any time to get an operation of this magnitude approved, that’ll be it. I’ll bring forward the motion myself.”

“Thank you!” I exclaim. If Agent Magnus pleads my case, the others will have to listen. And with Quinton and Maria backing him up, they’ll have no choice but to approve it.

“Don’t go thanking me just yet.” Magnus shakes his head. “You’re asking the folks in that room to trust the word of magicians, and that’ll be a tough sell after what happened to Merlin—even coming from a Junior Agent as accomplished as you. You’re fighting against decades, even centuries, of anti-magician prejudice.”

“But *you* believe us, right?” I ask.

Magnus takes a seat on the edge of his glass desk. “I’ve learned never to count you and your friends out, that’s for sure. If you say these apprentices can be trusted, that’s enough for old Magnus. In the meantime, you lot look like you could use some good news. Whaddaya say we pay a visit to the love of my life?”

When we enter her room in Supernatural Health, Agent Fiona is sitting up in bed.

“I brought a few friends who wanted to check on you,” Magnus announces after a quick knock.

My friends and I step inside, not sure what we’re going to find. On the way here, Magnus told us that Agent Fiona wasn’t in the best shape when she arrived.

But to our surprise, Fiona looks perfectly normal. She’s sitting on the edge of the bed, her red tangles tamed into a long ponytail. The Red Lady is frowning up at her little TV, her arms crossed.

“Hello,” I say, stepping into the room. My friends file in behind me.

Agent Fiona brightens when she sees us. “If it isn’t our gold star Junior. Saving our skins is getting to be a habit for ye, isn’t it?”

I feel my cheeks burn. Agent Fiona doesn’t give out compliments lightly. “I get the credit,” I say. “But I couldn’t do anything without these guys.”

Elsie shakes her head. “She’s just being modest.”

Magnus shuts the door and pulls a rose from under his sleeve. “A rose for my rose.”

“Aww,” Elsie and Lara say in unison.

Fiona rolls her eyes, but she can’t hide her grin. “There’s a war going on and yer out doing what . . . picking flowers?”

“A man’s gotta have his priorities in order.” Magnus shrugs. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, all things considered,” says Fiona. “It’s just my supernatural ability that’s exhausted, not me. Harlowe had me reading intentions every waking hour. Wanted a record of everyone around her. S’pose it was to make sure nobody was onto her. Barely got any rest, and eventually my ability just conked out.”

“As in it stopped working?” Lara asks.

“That’s right,” Fiona answers. “The cursebreakers are confident it’ll come back on its own once me blood magic levels return to normal. But nobody can say exactly when that’ll be. So for now I’m on bed rest, even though there’s plenty I could be doing for the Bureau, supernatural ability or not.”

Hearing Fiona makes me think about my own missing magic. She’s right; I shouldn’t be sulking about what I don’t have, I should be using the skills I’ve learned as a Junior Agent to do what I can.

“So you won’t be part of the War Council this afternoon?” I ask.

“’Fraid not,” Fiona says. “Above me pay grade anyways.” She looks us over and frowns. “What’s got all yer knickers in a twist?”

I’m about to explain what we learned about Dylan, the Wonders, and anti-magick when Magnus cuts me off. “Not for everyone’s ears.”

A cursebreaker has just showed up at the door. We’re silent as she comes around to check on the machine hooked up to Fiona’s left arm. She glances around, probably noticing how quiet it’s suddenly gotten.

“Anything good on TV?” Jayden asks.

Fiona throws up her hands. “Is reality TV the only thing folks watch these days? *Real Housewives from Beyond the Grave*, *Top Chef: Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, and when you change the channel, guess what? It’s just reruns of *Keeping Up with the Van Helsings*—no offense, Lara.”

“None taken,” Lara answers. “My cousins lead far more glamorous lives than I do.”

A knock comes on the door and Maria Van Helsing sticks her head in. Her eyebrows shoot up.

“Goodness,” she says. “There’s a full house in here.”

Lara lights up like a Christmas tree. “Maria!”

The sisters hug, and Quinton steps in behind Maria.

My brother grins. “And here I thought we’d just be making a quick stop before the War Council.”

“I’ve been texting you!” I say. “Like *multiple* times.”

Quinton frowns. “Sorry, Chicken Little. My phone’s on silent. We’ve been in one meeting after another. And the Bureau thought it might be good for morale if VanQuish did a live interview about our thoughts on the war.”

The cursebreaker flushes, her eyes wide as she looks between Quinton and Maria. “Just wanted to say I’m a big fan.”

My brother nods. “Grateful to have your support.”

The cursebreaker leaves and I quickly lock the door behind her.

Quinton raises an eyebrow.

“It’s good you’re both here.” I tell them everything.

Maria gasps. “The idea that anyone could wield power like that . . . it’s terrifying.”

“The good news is we don’t think he’s found the Wonder he needs yet,” I add. “So we can still beat him to it. It’s why we need to steal the mural away from him. This could be our only chance.”

“I’m sorry but doesn’t this seem a bit too good to be true?” asks Quinton. “The key to stopping Dylan is conveniently unguarded tonight, and all we need to do is go get it?”

“I mentioned it might be a trap,” says Magnus. “But we also gotta consider the possibility that sometimes luck’s just on your side. It’d be a shame to miss an opportunity to win this war because we thought it was too easy.”

“And you’re all in agreement that this tip is valid?” Maria asks us.

Jayden and Elsie nod. Lara says, “I trust Amari’s judgment. If she says it’s legit, then I’m with her.”

It’s nice to hear my friends have my back. But Quinton doesn’t look convinced. “Maybe we can revisit this after the War Council. We’ve got so many things to talk about already.”

“Already promised I’d bring it up for a vote,” says Magnus.

Quinton sighs. “Then we’ll just have to see how the vote goes.”



THE WAR COUNCIL MEETING STRETCHES WELL INTO lunch.

Me and my friends agreed *not* to camp outside the conference room (assuming they would even let us) to see if our plans get approved. But while Jayden and Elsie go to the food court to get stuffed on fried chicken and macaroni, Lara and I head to the Junior Agent training gym instead.

Not having my magic has shown me how important working on my Junior Agents skills is. As for Lara, she thinks working up a sweat might

help her recover from her freezing curse more quickly.

Unfortunately, dueling against a girl who's trained to be an agent her entire life isn't doing a whole lot for my confidence. Especially when said girl has supernatural athleticism. It's also why I'm lying in the giant ball pit, staring at Lara in the air above as she teases me with a celebratory spin and curtsy in her Sky Sprints.

I sit up and groan. "Okay, but I almost zapped you that time, right?"

"‘Almost’ might be too strong a word," says Lara. "But you stayed upright longer than usual. That's for sure."

I climb out of the ball pit and turn off my Sky Sprints. Lara deactivates hers too and descends onto the mat beside me.

"Good session," she says, offering me a fist bump.

I roll my eyes and laugh. "For you maybe." We bump fists, and I'm shocked at how cold her skin still is. "What's it feel like to be cursed?"

Lara frowns. "Honestly, this is the best I've felt since waking up in Supernatural Health. But imagine if your bones were suddenly made of ice, and they won't thaw. Getting my heart rate up makes it more bearable—" She stops short as the gym door opens.

I follow her eyes to the doorway. Maria's there, and I can tell by her expression that something's wrong. It's the same anxious look she gave me when I first got myself involved in the Great Game.

I get to my feet and start walking. "They didn't approve the mission?"

Maria shakes her head. "There was a lot of debate about whether sending agents was worth the risk. The vote was close—it could've gone either way."

I ball my fists at my sides. "This is so messed up. Lucas and Hannah are counting on me. I can't just leave them hanging."

Lara joins us at the training gym entrance. "Is there anything we can do to change the Council's minds?"

"I'm afraid not," says Maria. "Their decision is final." Her voice softens as her eyes return to me. "Also . . . I wanted to talk to you before you see your brother."

"Why?"

Maria sighs. "Because Quinton voted against the mission. He was the deciding vote."

I just stand there for a few moments, trying to understand what I just heard. Sure, I knew he wasn't wild about my idea, but to vote against it?

“Where is he?”

“Amari—”

“Tell me where he is,” I say.

Maria hesitates but finally says, “In the VanQuish office. But give it some time before you—”

I’m not listening. I’m already racing out of the training gym.

When I get there, I bang on the door. Agent Magnus answers.

“Reckon I’ll let you two have it out,” he says. “Just remember we’re all on the same side here.”

I don’t say anything, and Magnus steps past me into the hallway. Quinton stands on the bottom level of his office, surrounded by all the photos, awards, and VanQuish memorabilia.

“You know, then?” he says.

“How could you?” I yell. “I told you how important this is. If Dylan finds that Wonder he’ll be unstoppable. Lucas and Hannah are literally risking *everything* to stop him and you’re just abandoning them. I might not even be here if Lucas hadn’t saved me back at Harlowe’s place. How could you vote against helping them?”

My brother holds up both palms. “Amari, relax. Let’s talk about this. I know you’re angry. And you’ve got every right to be. But try to understand where I’m coming from.”

“Just tell me it’s not true,” I say. “Were you really the deciding vote?”

Quinton blows out a heavy sigh. “The Bureau doesn’t trust magicians. That’s the simple truth.”

“The Bureau doesn’t, or *you* don’t?” I ask. “Because your partner is a magician, and your little sister is a magician. Am I not trustworthy either? What was the point of trying to prove myself here?”

The door opens, and Maria walks in.

“How are *you* so calm?” I ask her.

Maria flushes, but her expression doesn’t change. It’s infuriating. “I get that you’re angry, but please try to hear your brother out.”

“How did you vote?” I ask Maria.

“I voted yes,” she says, but before I can use that information against Quinton, she adds, “but once I heard Quinton’s reasoning, I understood why he made his decision. So please give him the same chance that I did.”

“Fine,” I say, crossing my arms. “Go ahead.”

Quinton closes his eyes and when he opens them again, there's so much regret there that it almost dulls my anger. Almost.

"Amari," he says. "The Bureau is at war *with magicians*, and it's already hard enough without having Merlin's guidance. Everyone needs to be on the same page. If we join your magician friends, we'll lose the support of quite a few members. This isn't a time to be divided. What happens in the future when there's an important mission to be carried out and some agents decide they won't fight alongside magicians they don't know? The mission would be in jeopardy before it even begins. I wish with all my heart that things were different. That people could look at how incredible you and Maria are and understand what an asset magicians can be. But that's not the Bureau we've been asked to lead."

Part of me does understand, but I also know it's not that simple. "Everyone loves you. People gave *me* a chance because of how much they love you. All you had to do was say you believe Lucas and Hannah, and everyone else would've at least tried."

Quinton shakes his head. "But I don't trust them. I don't *know* them to trust them."

"You don't trust them because they're magicians," I say.

My brother looks frustrated. "Fine, you want to hear me say it? I don't trust them because they're magicians. Are you happy now?"

It feels like a slap. I don't even have a response.

"*Quinton*," says Maria.

"I'm sorry," says Quinton. "But it's not how I feel about you two. You're different—you know that."

Maria stares at the floor. And I can't help the tears pouring down my face. Because now I'm the one shaking my head. "What I know is that you had a chance to stand up for people like me and Maria and you took the easy way out. Wanna guess who taught me to do the opposite?"

Quinton doesn't have an answer for that. And I don't have anything left to say either. So I get up and stomp out of his office.

My heart aching, I stumble toward the elevators. I'm not sure where I'm going yet but I just want to be anyplace other than here.

Someone steps in front of me. "Aww, did the wee little baby get her feelings hurt?"

Tristan Davies. A bully—and another example of someone who judges magicians just for the heck of it.

“I heard about your ridiculous idea,” he continues. “Teaming up with magicians? Are you out of—”

I don’t even think. I pull out my Stun Stick and zap him. And then zap him again. And I keep zapping him until I feel arms wrap around me and pull at my Stun Stick. I kick and twist and scream as multiple agents wrestle me to the floor.

Next thing I know I’m face down with my arms pulled behind me.

I’m sobbing. I feel like I’m right back at Jefferson Academy last summer when Emily Grant wouldn’t leave me alone. I thought I was so much better than who I used to be.

But maybe I’m not.

What else did they expect from a magician?

I’m brought to Agent Magnus’s office. But he’s not here, so I just sit there with my arms cuffed. I’m so angry, and sad, and honestly scared. I can’t believe I just attacked another Junior Agent like that.

The door swings open and I lower my head, staring at the floor in front of me.

Magnus’s cowboy boots *click-clack* past me and I hear him fall heavily into the chair behind his desk. “Well, kid, you’ve certainly done it this time.”

“I . . .”

“No sense in being shy now.” Magnus chuckles.

Maybe I’m not in as much trouble as I thought. “Are you . . . *not* kicking me out of the Bureau?” I chance a glance to see Magnus chewing on an unlit cigar.

“Attacking a fellow Junior Agent is certainly grounds for dismissal,” he says.

My heart sinks.

“*However*,” Magnus continues, “what you’ve got going for you is a healthy habit of saving the Bureau’s skin, time and time again. That, and you did your attacking with a device specifically designed to cause zero harm to the poor soul being attacked.”

“Tristan is fine, then?” I ask.

“See, I’m gonna need you to pretend you knew he was going to be fine all along,” says Magnus. “Goes a long way toward proving you meant no harm.”

“I . . . um, of course. Totally knew that zapping Tristan into oblivion was no big deal.”

Magnus grins and clicks something on his desk that causes my handcuffs to spring open.

“But he really is fine, though, right?” I ask in a small voice.

“His pride might be a bit wounded, seeing as how you went after him in front of his friends. And knowing Davies, that’ll be what he’s most upset about.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m very sorry for that,” I say. “Besides, shouldn’t he be in trouble for supporting Harlowe? I saw him at the Victory Gala and he didn’t seem very brainwashed to me.”

Magnus raises an eyebrow. “And you’re an expert in that, are ya?”

“No,” I say. “I guess not.”

He sits up straighter. “You’ve got a bit of a temper, kid, and there’s nothing wrong with that so long as you channel it in the right direction. But remember, you and Davies are on the same side in this war. So are you and your brother.”

The mention of Quinton brings a fresh surge of anger. “I can’t believe everything I did to get Quinton back, just for him to turn out to be—”

“Human?” Magnus finishes.

I sigh. “He literally told me he doesn’t trust magicians. *I’m* a magician. *Maria* is a magician.”

“And Quinton has seen agents killed by magicians. Attended their funerals. Been kidnapped and tortured by Moreau.”

“That’s no excuse,” I say.

“I ain’t saying he’s right,” says Magnus. “I’m just saying sometimes it’s okay to extend some grace. Especially to someone you know is a good person. Same as I’m doing for you right now by letting you stay.”

“But Quinton’s stubbornness means Lucas and Hannah are on their own tonight. What if they get hurt? What if we miss our one chance to stop Dylan and he’s able to get his hands on the Wonder that will let him destroy whole cities?”

“I happen to agree with you entirely,” says Magnus. “In fact, I voted yes to the mission.”

“Too bad it doesn’t change anything.”

Magnus nods. “Yep, a real shame. Think I’ll leave my Assistant Director transporter here on my desk while I go think about how upset it

makes me.”

I lean forward in my seat. Could Agent Magnus mean what I think he does? “What are you saying?”

“Oh, nothing. Was just thinking it’d be a real shame if someone were to take that transporter and use it to help out those apprentices in whatever way they could, provided it don’t involve them being heroes and putting themselves in more danger than is absolutely necessary.”

“Give me that transporter and I will play it so safe,” I say. “You’ve never seen anyone play it as safe as I’m about to. Promise.”

“Welp,” he says. “That’s good enough for me. I’ll be on my way, then.” Magnus gets to his feet and makes a show of dusting himself off.

I stay seated, stunned at the turn this visit has taken. When I came in here, I was sure I was about to be kicked out of the Bureau. But it looks like Agent Magnus is giving me what I need to help Lucas and Hannah after all.

“Agent Magnus,” I say as he moves for the door. “Back at Chamberlain Manor, you said it’s an adult’s job to protect the kids they care about. That nothing comes before that.”

“Sounds like something I’d say.” He nods. “And it’s as true today as it ever was.”

“Then why help me sneak out?” I ask. “No matter what I promise, I could be running straight into danger.”

Magnus sighs. “I’ve been watching you these past two summers, Amari Peters. And I’ve come to believe you’re the finest Junior Agent there’s ever been. That includes your very famous brother and his equally accomplished partner. Now, you do step in it every now and then—goodness knows that’s true. But you’ve got a kind heart, kid, and you keep trying no matter the odds. What I’m saying is, even when it scares me to pieces wondering what you’ll get in your head to do next, I know I can trust you.”

“Thank you.” I don’t know what else to say. My heart feels full enough to burst.

He smiles. “You be careful out there—and remember, no unnecessary risks. Most important thing is getting back here in one piece. Got it?”

I grin. “Got it.”



ME AND MY FRIENDS FORM A TIGHT CIRCLE ON MY dorm room floor, my cell phone set down between us. I type up a quick message to the Eurg account

Lucas and Hannah messaged us from, while Peek-a-Boo zips around overhead, awake and excited to be doing something sneaky.

From Amari Peters :
We can help with the mural after all.

“I hope we’re not too late,” says Elsie. “They’ve probably already got something planned.”

“Let’s hope not,” I say. “They’re completely on their own. They need us.”

The phone buzzes.

New Text Message from Hannah & Lucas:
Safe to call?

I send a thumbs-up emoji and then accept their FaceTime call. They must be outside because tall trees surround them. Both crowd in close to the screen.

“Is the Bureau really going to join us?” asks Hannah.

I frown. “No, just us. But we’ve got a transporter.”

Lucas sits back a little. “I’m not surprised. They’ve hated magicians for longer than any of us have been alive and, honestly, the feeling is mutual.”

“That’s not helpful,” says Hannah, making a face at Lucas. “The fact that even a few of us can work together means there’s hope.”

“I know I’m probably the last person who should talk,” says Lara sheepishly. “But I think you’re right. There’s nothing stopping the Bureau and the League of Magicians from becoming allies in the future.” She glances to me. “Especially when there are people who are members of both.”

I nod. “The Bureau’s been freed from Harlowe’s influence. All that’s left is to take down Dylan. Preferably before he can find what he’s looking for.”

“Easier said than done,” says Jayden.

“Less talking, more plotting!” groans Peek-a-Boo. “Let’s get to the fun stuff!”

“I’m with the ghost,” says Lucas. “If we’re gonna do this, we need to get going. We might not get a better chance than tonight.”

“Right.” My eyes go back to the phone. “Do you guys already have a plan for how to get the mural?”

Hannah’s expression turns uncertain. “So . . . we know where it’s being kept. But it’s guarded by magicians this time.”

Lucas nods. “And they’re a nasty bunch, these guys. The sort who’ve always resented being limited to fair magick. Now that Dylan has given them permission to explore the foul path, they practically worship him for it.”

“Great.” Lara groans. “We’ll get to be the first ones they test their new curses on.”

Peek-a-Boo swoops down to put himself in the middle of the circle. “I’m not afraid. You can’t kill what’s already dead.”

Lucas is nodding again, some of the grumpiness leaving his expression. “Your ghost friend might be onto something.”

“What if we used Peek-a-Boo as a distraction?” I ask. “He could help us get in unnoticed.”

I’m encouraged by the nods around the room.

“It would mean Jayden would have to be there too,” says Elsie. “A haunter and hauntee can only be a short distance apart.”

“And how far is that?” asks Jayden. “Cause I ain’t read the fine print.”

Elsie shrugs. “Maybe twenty feet or so?”

“We got a tip from an apprentice in Dylan’s inner circle that the mural is being kept in a cabin out in the Siberian wilderness,” says Hannah. “Jayden could keep to the trees while your ghost lures the magicians away.”

Lara leans forward. “I like it.”

“So who’s going?” Hannah says.

Lucas frowns. “It might be better to decide who’s *not* going. We can’t take any unnecessary risks—this is too important.”

Elsie wilts a little. “I should probably stay, then. If things go bad, I doubt I’ll be much use in a fight. Fire dragons don’t do so well in freezing temperatures.”

I nod. “Besides, we’ll need someone to keep an eye on what’s happening back here. It would kinda suck to teleport back and find Bertha waiting for us.”

Elsie smiles. “I can do that.”

“The girl I froze should probably stay too,” says Lucas. “Sorry, I don’t know your name.”

Lara frowns. “It’s Lara, and I’m fine.”

“Except you aren’t.” Elsie reaches over to grab Lara’s hand. “You’re still ice cold.”

“Siberia is colder than freezing,” says Hannah. “Even in July. I’m sure the harsh weather is why Dylan chose that location in the first place. Just one more thing to keep people away.”

“You need to keep warm,” I say. “That’s what you told me the cursebreakers said.”

Lara looks like she’s ready to protest anyway but crosses her arms. “Fine. I know you all are only doing this because you care about me or whatever, but I still don’t like it.”

“Noted,” I say.

“Well, Lucas and I have to be there,” says Hannah. “We’re the only ones capable of reading the mural. It’s written in an Old Magician script. Apprentices have to learn it as part of our training.”

“So that’s you guys, Jayden, and me.” I pull out my Stun Stick. “I may not have magic but I can still defend myself.”

“Then we’ve got a plan,” says Hannah. “I’ll send over the exact location of the mural.”

When 12:00 a.m. flashes across my cell phone, I tap the screen to shut off the alarm. Not that any of us needed it. My friends and I have been camped in my dorm room, counting down the minutes. Other than Lara heading back to her room a few hours ago to grab her warmest jackets, no one wanted to risk leaving. Too much is on the line.

The real surprise is that Bertha hasn’t come knocking yet. Her supernatural ability allows her to literally sniff out trouble, and sneaking out to do the very thing my brother and the War Council voted *not* to do has gotta give off a pretty strong odor, I’d think.

Not that I’m complaining.

**New Text Message from Lucas & Hannah:
We’re awake. It’s now or never.**

“Time to go,” says Lara.

Me and Jayden both slip on the thick fur coats she grabbed for us. Mine is dark and woolly, and I half feel like a bear. Jayden's looks much fancier, made of a plush white material that's soft to the touch. Neither of us is the same height as Lara—I'm slightly shorter and Jayden is a head taller—but the magic of Duboise brand clothing is that it's one size fits all.

I grab the transporter off my bed and face the others. Elsie wraps me and Jayden in a big hug while Lara gives us a nod and says, "Be careful."

"We will," I say.

"Peek-a-Boo, you ready?" Jayden asks.

The ghost stills, looking suddenly serious. "You know how some people are born ready? Well, this ghost *died* ready."

"All right, then." I shake out my nerves and then loop my arm through Jayden's. "Be back soon. Hopefully with a big honking piece of stone."

Elsie and Lara step back while I enter in the coordinates on the transporter. Then I tap the red button that bends the world around us, and suddenly we're standing ankle-deep in snow surrounded by tall trees. It would be completely dark if not for Peek-a-Boo's bright shimmer.

Footsteps sound behind us. Hannah and Lucas jog over in matching winter jackets.

"It's a good thing you brought the ghost," says Hannah. "Otherwise, it might've taken us forever to find you guys in this forest."

"Any chance you could dim your glow a little?" asks Lucas. "We don't want Dylan's guards to see us coming."

Peek-a-Boo sticks out his tongue but does as he's asked.

"The cabin is this way." Hannah points back over her shoulder. "Follow me."

The four of us race through the forest, feet crunching in the snow. Peek-a-Boo keeps pace above us.

"This is close enough," Lucas calls.

The four of us stop near the edge of the trees, where a large log cabin sits in a small clearing. The windows are all lit up, and smoke wafts out of a stone chimney. We crouch behind a thick tree.

Lucas looks to each of us. "Everybody remember what they're supposed to do?"

We all nod, and I reach into my jacket for my Stun Stick.

"Remember," says Lucas. "We can't leave here without that mural. Do whatever it takes, got it?"

“Got it,” we answer.

“Peek-a-Boo,” says Hannah. “You’re up. Jayden, you keep to the trees and do your best to stay out of sight.”

He nods. “I’m ready.”

Peek-a-Boo floats out into the open, inflating himself so he’s five times his original size. He’s become a ghostly green giant.

“Fee, fi, fo, fum!” the ghost bellows. “Your doom is near! Your time has come!”

The cabin door swings open, and a bearded man pokes his head out. The guy’s jaw drops, and he backs up a few steps before regaining his composure and charging into the snowy clearing.

“Intruder!” he calls, and two more men come outside to join him, looking as flustered as the first guy. But I’ve got to give them credit, they all stand their ground. The three magicians begin to wave their hands and the snow begins to form into a tall, gruesome-looking snowman that charges at Peek-a-Boo.

Jayden dashes off through the trees. But our ghost friend looks more offended than frightened and takes up a battle stance.

I mutter anxiously, “Come on, Peek. We didn’t come here to fight. Remember the plan.”

I’m not sure whether he hears me or comes to his senses on his own, but the ghost turns and makes a hasty retreat into the forest on the opposite side of the clearing. And just like we’d hoped, the magicians give chase, shouting as they pursue the monstrous ghost.

Well, two of them do anyway. That first magician stays put, peering suspiciously into the surrounding woods. Lucas, Hannah, and I duck low to keep out of sight.

“Guess I’m up next,” says Lucas.

“Be careful,” says Hannah. “Defensive spells only. That’s a master magician out there, and you’re still an apprentice.”

Lucas cracks a half smile. “No promises.”

Before Hannah can respond, Lucas darts into the clearing.

The magician near the doorway sneers as he recognizes him. “Dylan won’t look kindly upon traitors.” Snow flurries swirl around him, forming into more snowy monsters that growl and leap to attack.

But Lucas is no slouch with his own wintery magic. He throws up solid walls of ice, and the snow creatures shatter against them.

The other magician is relentless, throwing wave after wave against Lucas's ice walls until they crumble and he has to create more. The attacks continue until the magician begins to push Lucas backward.

"You are a *child*," the magician spits. "Do you really think you're a match for me?"

Lucas just keeps backing up, leading the magician farther from the entrance. Which is exactly what we want.

"The moment they're out of sight we make a run for it," says Hannah.

I nod and tighten my grip on my Stun Stick.

Finally the magician gets impatient with Lucas's backpedaling and decides to take matters into his own hands, charging him full on. The sudden change in strategy catches Lucas off guard. The magician tackles him and they tumble around the side of the house.

Hannah gasps, her eyes following Lucas.

"We've gotta go," I say.

"R-right," she says, her eyes still lingering on the spot where Lucas just was. "Let's get that mural."

Me and Hannah sprint out of the trees toward the cabin. I whip my head back and forth for any sign of those magician guards coming back. But it looks like our distractions worked. The mission is going just like we planned.

Assuming we can get inside, that is. I try the door handle but of course it's locked. A keypad sits to the right of the door.

"Let me handle this." Hannah places her hand on the keypad and closes her eyes.

A lock clicks. I try the handle again and this time the door opens. We slip inside, eyes darting around the living room. There's a fire going in the fireplace and a giant moose head hanging from the wall. The guards must've just sat down for a meal because there are three steaming plates of food on the table.

I race across the large bear hide rug to a door and push it open. But the only thing I find are bunk beds. Behind me, Hannah's search reveals an empty closet.

We both eye the last door in the room. Another keypad.

The mural has got to be in there. We start to head over but Hannah stops me short.

"Stay back," she says. "It might be hexed, like the last time."

“What do we do?” I ask.

Hannah swallows. “I’m the only one here with tech magic—meaning it’s up to me to get that door open. It’s important that whatever happens only happens to me. If I can’t go on, then you need to get in there and nab the mural.”

“But what about you?” I ask.

“Doesn’t matter,” says Hannah. “This may be our last chance—we can’t blow it. Promise me you’ll leave here with that mural no matter what happens to me.”

I hesitate.

Hannah glances anxiously over her shoulder. “We don’t have any more time, Amari. *Promise me.*”

“Promise.”

She nods then steps forward and places her hand against the keypad. I hold my breath until I hear a loud click.

Hannah turns to face me, a hesitant smile filling up her face. “Maybe I worried for nothing—” Her eyes go wide and a look of terror twists her face. At first I don’t understand what’s happening, until she raises a hand and I watch it harden into stone.

“Hannah!” I race over, unsure what to do.

“The mural,” she whispers, and then her face too becomes solid rock. In an instant the statue vanishes into a maelstrom of swirling shadow and flame.

I’ve barely got time to react before a familiar voice reaches me from inside the locked room.

“I demand you untie me at once!”

Harlowe.



JUST LIKE AT THE GALA, I FEEL MY BODY MOVE ON ITS OWN to obey her. I struggle to fight it but it's no use.

My hands push open the door and my feet carry me forward, rounding a corner to find Harlowe sitting on a cot, her hands and legs tied with thick chains. The faun is still in her fancy red dress from the Victory Gala.

“*You!*” Harlowe barks. “I knew you were working with that horrible Dylan Van Helsing! You filthy magicians are all alike. Villains through and through!”

I want to snap back that she’s the true villain, but I’m too freaked out at losing control over my body. Soon I’m tugging at her chains where they’re attached to the wall.

Harlowe goes still, squinting up at me. And then I see it—the moment *she* realizes I’m no longer immune to her mind control. I was in disguise at the Victory Gala, so she had no idea she was controlling me then.

Harlowe leans forward, smirking. “They keep the key in a box outside the door. Go fetch it.”

No, no, no! As much as I will myself to resist, it’s no use. Next thing I know I’m heading back through the door to where a set of keys dangles from a small hook.

“Hurry, girl, get me out of these chains!”

My hand shakes from straining to keep the key from entering the lock. But again, Harlowe’s supernatural ability wins out. I unlock one side and then the other, the shackles hitting the floor with a clank.

Once she’s on her feet Harlowe wobbles, her balance off. “Where are the guards?”

I don’t answer.

She turns to face me fully. “*Tell me* where they are.”

“Distracted,” I’m forced to admit. “But I don’t know for how long.”

Harlowe nods. “Then we’ll need to move quickly. Did you bring a transporter—is that how you got here?”

Again I keep quiet.

“Show me your arms, girl,” Harlowe snaps. “*Now.*”

I reach over and pull back my sleeves to reveal the transporter strapped there.

“Fantastic! Give it to . . .” Harlowe’s voice trails off, her gaze snagging on a chunk of stone covered in the corner. That must be the mural.

“The way they fawned over this ridiculous rock. . . .” Her eyes snap to meet mine. “Keep still while I show you the price of offending Elaine Harlowe.”

Panic grips me and my entire body goes rigid. Harlowe reaches down to slip off one of her heels. Then she hoists the shoe over her head and brings it down hard against the mural. She hits it again and again.

I want to scream at her to stop. But I can't move my mouth.

Jayden appears in the doorway, followed by Lucas.

"Boo!" Peek-a-Boo appears inches away from a distracted Harlowe and the faun yelps, stumbling back.

"Stay away!" she cries, her eyes darting madly until they settle on me. "Don't just sit there! Defend me."

The relief I feel at being able to move again evaporates when I reach for my Stun Stick to aim at my friends. "She's controlling me," I shout, sending a blast that narrowly misses Lucas. "I can't stop myself."

Lucas reacts fast, creating a wall of ice between me and the rest of them. My blasts ricochet off the icy barrier nearly hitting the camera up near the ceiling. A camera? What if someone's watching? Reinforcements could come at any moment.

A growl from Harlowe brings my attention back to her. For the moment, she's trapped on the other side of the ice with Jayden and Lucas moving in.

"Y-you . . ." Harlowe points at Jayden. "Tackle him!"

Jayden isn't magical enough to ignore the faun's orders either. As reluctant as he must be, Jayden turns and throws himself at Lucas, and they both end up on the floor.

Harlowe sees her opening and takes it, sprinting past them through the doorway.

Jayden gets up to give chase, but Lucas grabs his arm, saying, "Forget her, we came here for the mural." He lets the ice wall melt away.

For a moment I worry that I might start attacking them again on Harlowe's orders, but I don't. My body is my own again.

"What happened to the guards?" I ask.

"Lost 'em," says Jayden. "But they gonna be back soon."

"Then we've got to go," says Lucas. "Where's Hannah?"

My heart sinks. "Gone. The door had a hex on it. She turned to stone and vanished right after opening it."

Lucas goes pale. "So Dylan has her now. I'll go after her. You guys take what's left of the mural and keep it safe."

“Do you really think you’ll be able to find her?” I point to the camera. “Dylan will know you’re coming.”

He shakes his head. “I’ve got to try. I owe her that much.”

“Then we’ll do our part,” I say. “We’ll keep the mural safe—”

“The Harlowe woman disappeared into the trees,” calls a voice from outside. “Go after her. I’ll check inside for the intruders.”

“The guards are back,” I say. “We’re out of time.”

“Go,” says Lucas. “I’ll keep them busy.”

I nod and then me and Jayden hurry over to the stone mural. Thankfully, Harlowe never ordered me to hand over the transporter. The last image I see before the world bends around me is Lucas stepping outside, hands covered in ice.

He’s buying us enough time to escape. And once we’re gone Lucas can simply teleport away to safety. I really hope he’s able to get Hannah back.

Lara and Elsie are sitting on Elsie’s bed when we reappear in my room. And it’s a good thing because the mural takes up most of the space between our beds.

“I kinda thought it’d be bigger,” Elsie says.

Lara leans in closer. “Why is it so scratched up?”

“Ran into a complication—a Harlowe-sized complication.” I explain to them how badly things went for us back at the cabin. “We can’t let Hannah’s sacrifice be for nothing. Now that we’ve got the mural, it’s up to us to get to the Wonders before Dylan.”

Elsie pores over the mural. I bite my lip and squat next to her. Hopefully Harlowe didn’t do so much damage that we can’t read it.

There’s some text on the stone, but most of the mural is made up of faded pictures instead of words—kind of like hieroglyphs. At the center is a tall, bearded guy wearing dark robes. “That must be the first magician Dr. Jekyll told us about.” His figure is covered in thick vines and encircled by eight items. “And those must be his inventions—his Wonders.” A couple are so badly scratched it’s impossible to tell what they are.

There’s an elaborate key, a fancy torch, and—

“Whoa.” I point to the black Crown. “Is that what I think it is?”

“The Crown of Vladimir!” says Elsie. “It’s a Wonder?”

Jayden leans in closer. “Gotta be. Unless there’s another magic Crown we don’t know about.”

“So . . . the Crown of Vladimir wasn’t actually created by Vladimir himself?” asks Lara.

“Bruh,” says Jayden. “Didn’t know you could plagiarize magic.”

“We need to know what these glyphs mean,” I say. “Unfortunately Hannah and Lucas were supposed to be our translators.”

“Actually, I made a trip of my own while you guys were gone—just in case.” Elsie holds up a handful of high-tech eyewear. “Translation goggles from the Relics Repository. We don’t know every magician language, but we do know a few.”

“Good thinking, Els,” I say. “It’s worth a try.”

Elsie grins as she passes out the goggles. Jayden has the least amount of hair to work the strap around, so he gets his on the quickest. But I can tell from the “Whoa!” he lets out that they must be working. And sure enough, the moment I’m finally able to tap the power button on my own goggles, words appear before my eyes, the glyphs translated to English.

The top of the mural reads:

**The First Human to Tame Magic.
He Whom We Called Master, Explorer, Grand Artificer,
And Inventor of Despicable Wonders.**

“So this Grand Artificer guy is definitely the first magician,” says Elsie.

I nod. “And this mural must’ve been created by his apprentices.” I point to the items surrounding the robed figure. “Which means these are definitely his Wonders.”

Lara raises an eyebrow. “Is no one else concerned about the ‘despicable’ part? Because I certainly am.”

Jayden nods. “Nah, freaks me out too.”

That’s when Peek-a-Boo shimmers into existence, a devious glint in his eyes. “Did someone say despicable?”

I ignore the ghost and focus in on the mural again. “Look how these vines are wrapped around the Grand Artificer’s hands and wrists. It reminds me of the restraints the magicians used on Harlowe. Do you think his own apprentices did that to him?”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” Jayden answers. “But why?”

Elsie taps her finger lower on the translation. “Keep reading.”

**To Protect the World
And to Protect Our Master from Himself
We Have Imprisoned Him
And Hidden His Terrible Creations.
We Leave This Testament to His Heirs,
Those Born to Magic.
Seek Them at Your Own Peril.**

Despicable Wonders? Terrible creations? I don't get it—couldn't someone also use them for good if they chose to? I shift my gaze to the Crown and read the short passage underneath.

CROWN OF EXCESS

*There is only so much magic one man can possess.
So our Master crafted an item capable of storing limitless power.*

“That’s definitely the same Crown that Dylan has,” I say. “The one that once belonged to Vladimir. It’s got my magic and the League’s magic too.”

“So wait,” says Lara. “Does that mean the Night Brothers knew about this Grand Artificer guy? Could they have known about the mural too?”

“They must have,” says Elsie. She points to the next item, a glimmering gemstone cut to look like a jewel.

TIME GEM

*By far our Master’s most difficult challenge to create.
Time has no master, save the bearer of this gemstone.*

My friends and I exchange glances, and I know we’re all thinking the same thing. Destroying the Time Gem is how Dylan emptied the entire Congress Room. It’s why Merlin is gone. All because I couldn’t end the time freeze when I had the chance.

Elsie must see how I’m feeling because she reaches over to give my hand a squeeze.

Lara places her finger on the next item. “Guys . . . read the next one.”

SPARK OF LIFE

To breathe life into the lifeless.

*Our Master's crowning achievement
and the start of his dark descent,
convincing him that he is a god among men.*

"Incredible," says Elsie. "The magical science community has always wondered how the Night Brothers were able to create UnWanted. Turning shadows into living beings is so far beyond anything we can do even now. . . . And why does it look like a cigarette lighter?"

"I don't know," I say. "Anybody else feel kinda weirded out? I mean, we know that the Night Brothers created UnWanted, but still."

"Right or wrong," says Lara. "That's three Wonders in a row we know the Night Brothers owned."

I look at the fourth and fifth items, but they've been almost completely scratched out by Harlowe's heel. The spell can't even translate the words. Some of the sixth item is gone too. The diagram shows a bladed weapon, but the title is missing. There's only a description.



*With the creation of this Wonder,
his ambitions became solely focused on destruction.
This Blade will obliterate anything it touches,
leaving nothing behind.*

Hannah believed it important to not only keep the Wonders away from Dylan, but to use them to take him down. An idea sparks in my head. "Guys! We can use this to destroy the Crown!"

My friends just stare.

"I know the idea of using the Wonders seems scary," I continue, "but Dr. Jekyll told us it takes an incredible amount of magic to destroy one. The only reason Dylan is magical enough is because of all the power stored in the Crown. You saw how much magic it took to break open the Time Gem. If we can't stop him from finding the Wonder he needs to control anti-magick, then this might be our next best option."

“It’s a great plan B,” Elsie agrees. “But here’s plan A. We stop Dylan from finding *this*.” She slides her finger to the next item, what looks like a fancy magnifying glass. “I’ll bet anything this is the Wonder that Director Ing warned Merlin about.”

LENS OF INCREASE

*The last of our Master’s inventions,
it greatly amplifies the effect of any spell.
Because why continue to invent Wonders,
when this Lens can make any enchantment wondrous.*

“But how can you be sure this is the one?” I ask.

“Anti-magick experiments might be forbidden, but the theory of anti-magick is well understood in mathematics,” Elsie answers. “Remember when I said that magic and anti-magick cancel each other out, like positive two and negative two? Well, think of anti-magick as a force that knows it shouldn’t exist. It explodes because it’s looking for magic to cancel out.”

“So how does the Lens change that?” I ask.

“Keep thinking about it in terms of math,” says Elsie. “The Lens has an enchantment that won’t allow that negative two to combine with a positive two to become zero. Instead, it forces the anti-magick to become more powerful, growing instead to negative six, and then negative ten or twenty. Instead of getting to zero, it’s going the opposite direction. You’re essentially preventing anti-magick from eliminating itself. You’re keeping it around, and at that point, it’s yours to wield.”

“That brain of yours really is something,” says Jayden.

Elsie blushes. “Comes in handy from time to time.”

“Bottom line is all the Wonders are dangerous,” I say. “But especially the Lens of Increase.”

Jayden frowns. “So what that mean for the search?”

“It means we go after them all,” I say. “But if it’s a choice between the Lens and anything else, we choose the Lens.”

“Except we don’t know where literally any of the Wonders are,” says Lara. “Or how many the Night Brothers found. What if they’ve been moved or hidden a second time?”

“Dr. Jekyll insisted that the answers we need are in this mural,” I say. “Let’s go over it again and see if there’s anything we missed.”

We start scanning for a clue. Even Peek-a-Boo peers down to read.

“Any luck?” I ask.

“Nah, but I did find a button that says Activate?” says Jayden.

Elsie raises an eyebrow. “Huh?”

“Yeah,” Jayden continues, pointing down at a circular, slightly raised bit of stone.

I lean my head over the mural to have a better look. “It really does look like a button.”

Lara looks skeptical. “A button made of stone?”

“So . . . who wants to be the one to push it?” asks Elsie.

“You guys went through the trouble of getting this thing here.” Lara takes a deep breath. “The least I can do is press a button.”

“But should we?” Elsie asks. “Not to be a wuss, but there’s lots of mentions of how terrible these Wonders are. What if this mural isn’t any different? This could go a lot of different ways is all I’m saying.”

“Well, we didn’t bring it here to *not* learn its secrets,” I say. “Who votes we press the button?”

Jayden and Lara both raise their hands.

Elsie sighs in resignation. “Fine. At least you’re safe, Peek-a-Boo.”

The ghost sticks out his tongue.

“Here goes nothing.” Lara presses on the stone button, gasping at how far her finger sinks into the surface. Suddenly clinks and clanks come from inside the mural, and a faint glow begins to emanate from the surface of the stone.

The image of the Grand Artificer begins to smile, throwing his arms out wide to point at the various gadgets surrounding him. Each time his arms point to a Wonder, it comes to life. The Crown twirls, breaking apart to show interlocking gears and plates and pumping pistons. Even the Time Gem comes apart to reveal tiny machinery inside. I stare at the mysterious dagger as its hilt opens to reveal shiny silver springs.

It’s like the mural is some kind of machine, the surface glowing like an ancient stone computer tablet. It’s incredible.

Elsie leans forward, eyes wide.

“The level of genius required to not only tame magic but also bind it to machinery.” My best friend shakes her head. “Basically taking the chaos of the unnatural and giving it order—except not nature’s order but one of his own making. Look at the inside of these Wonders—the magic and anti-magick are kept separate, allowing each force to work independently, but

also in conjunction. It's also what keeps the anti-magick inside the Wonders from destroying the Wonders themselves. It's genius!"

"Seeing as I only understood about half of that," says Lara, "I'll just take your word for it."

Elsie's excitement bubbles over. "It's basically a recipe to do the impossible. The magic creates an unnatural state, while the anti-magick is used to destroy the ordinary limitations that even magic has. I can't even begin to imagine how he could've done it. Especially when these machine parts hadn't been invented yet even in the known world. This is literally the most important magical discovery of all time."

"Look! The words are rearranging," I say.

*As we are unable to destroy these Wonders,
We have scattered them to the four corners of the world.
Seek them if you have a cause that is noble
and a heart that is daring.*

Lara crosses her arms, her brow furrowed. "If the, um, nameless knife Wonder can destroy anything, then why didn't they use it to destroy the other Wonders?"

I shrug. "Good question."

"Because they're masterpieces," says Elsie. "I wouldn't have the heart to destroy them either."

The image of the Grand Artificer points to the eighth item on the diagram. A key.

LOCKLESS KEY

*This Key needs no lock,
to get you where you need to be
or locate what you're trying to find.
The only way to connect anywhere to everywhere.*

"Maybe this Lockless Key can help us find the other Wonders," I say.

"Hate to keep being a killjoy," says Lara. "But we don't know where the Key is either."

I bite down on my lip. "Yeah, there is that tiny problem."

"Maybe that answer's on the mural too," says Jayden.

We scour the thing until Elsie finally says, “This is practically an ancient computer, right? Created by the first-ever magicians? One thing we haven’t seen is what happens when Amari touches the mural.”

My friends all look to me.

“But I’m not a magician anymore,” I say. “I’ve lost my magic.”

“*We leave this testament to his heirs.*” Elsie points to the message at the top of the mural. “*Those born to magic.* It doesn’t say you have to currently be a magician. It says you have to be *born* a magician. That’s a big difference.”

Elsie’s right, of course. So I reach out and place my hand against the surface. The whole thing begins to glow extra bright, the images of the Wonders becoming bolder, no longer faded. More than that, the glyphs shift into words I can understand.

“So we didn’t need the translation goggles after all,” says Elsie. “It just needed to be touched by the right person.”

Out of nowhere I get a jolt through my fingertips, and understanding flashes through me. I know how to get what we need. I slide my hand over to the image of the Key and instantly feel something solid materialize beneath my touch.

My fingers close around metal and I hold it out for the others to see. It’s every bit as elaborate as the picture—gears turn and wheels spin.

“The Lockless Key,” Elsie breathes.

“I can’t believe that actually worked,” says Lara.

I shake my head. “I just kinda knew it would. I can’t really explain it.”

“What’s all them dials on the front for?” Jayden asks.

“No clue,” I say.

Lara leans closer. “Any chance you can figure out how the Key works too?”

I take another look at the mural. “It says you don’t need a lock. Maybe it works anywhere?”

“Let’s try it,” Peek-a-Boo says excitedly. “What’s the worst that can happen? An explosion?”

That’s not a very comforting thought. Still, I do want to see how this thing works. I glance around the room until I settle on the strip of wall between the closet and the bathroom. Then I get to my feet and walk over, my friends right on my heels.

“Here goes nothing.” I stick the pointed end of the Key into the wall, not totally sure what to expect.

It bumps against the wall, chipping the paint.

“Well, *that* was disappointing,” groans Peek-a-Boo.

“Truly,” Lara agrees.

Elsie looks closer at the Key. “If it’s anything like a transporter, then you’ve got to give it a destination for it to work.”

I nod at that. “Makes sense. Let’s try this again. Um . . . take me to the . . . Lens of Increase.”

There’s the sound of clinking metal and I feel the Key shudder, the gears inside coming to life. I grin, my eyes wide. Could it really be this simple?

But then the Key goes still and an illusion bursts into life in front of us. Two teenage boys, both wearing bright red cloaks. They’re laughing.

“You thought it would be that easy?” says the first.

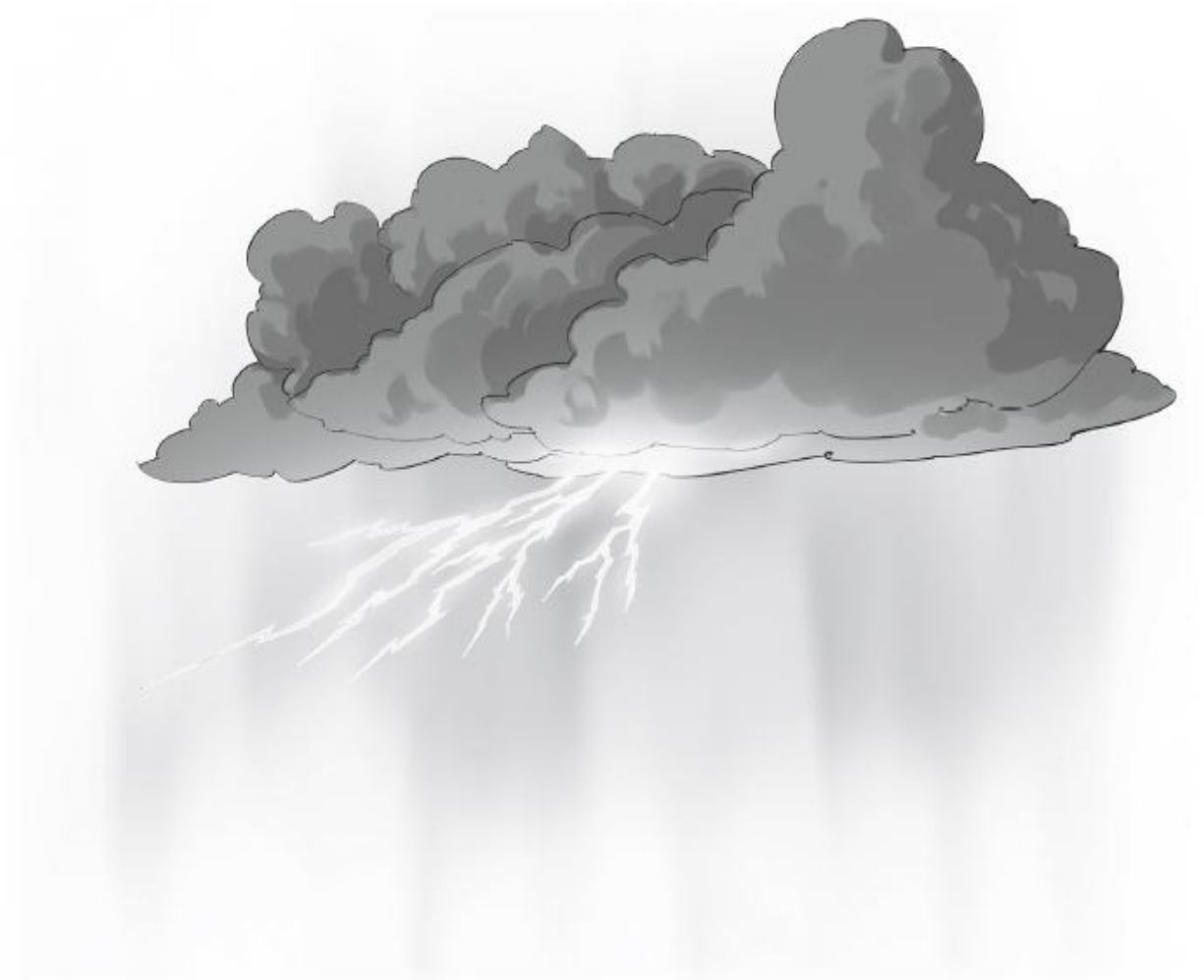
“Well, it was for us.” The other chuckles.

“I’m afraid this magical inheritance has already been claimed by us, the Night Brothers—Vladimir and Moreau!”

Both boys take a bow and vanish.

My friends and I don’t have time to react to whatever we just saw. Because a booming knock rattles the door on its hinges.

A Bertha knock.



“OPEN UP!” BERTHA SHOUTS, DELIVERING ANOTHER knock.

Me and Elsie scramble to drag blankets and pillows off the bed to cover up the mural.

“Are all stolen magic items out of sight?” Lara asks, glancing around.

I shove the Lockless Key into my back pocket. “Think so.”

“It’s y’all’s room,” says Jayden. “Should probably be one of y’all who answers.”

“Right,” says Elsie. “On it.”

My friend steps to the door and cracks it open just enough to peek outside. She has to jump back as Bertha shoves her way in.

“Well, look at that,” says Bertha. “The gang’s all here. To think I’ve been helping out in other departments, certain that my sixteen and up crowd would know how to behave. Alas it slipped my mind that you four were still around to make me regret that decision.”

I bite my lip. Me and Bertha have come a long way since last summer when I was a trainee. She’s even looked out for me and my friends a few times—we couldn’t have snuck out to solve the time freeze without her help.

But all that was before we went on an unauthorized mission to retrieve a mural Merlin didn’t want anyone to ever see. Not to mention the state of our room after our mad scramble to hide it.

I can’t imagine what Bertha must be thinking right now.

“Just a pillow fight that got a little out of control,” I say. “Good thing camp isn’t officially in session or we might be in a world of trouble, huh?”

“Nice try, Peters. We’ll discuss what you lot are *actually* doing in here as soon as you return. Your brother has requested you all’s presence immediately.” Bertha clucks her tongue. “I’d say I’m the least of your worries right now. That was as angry as I’ve ever seen our Quinton Peters.”

“He’s mad?” I ask. “And he wants to talk to *all* of us?” That can’t be good.

“*Piping* mad is how I’d describe it,” says Bertha. “And, yes, he asked for the whole crew.”

We exchange glances. Even Peek-a-Boo shivers, shriveling into a bit of ghostly mist.

“Did Quinton happen to mention *why* we’re in trouble?” asks Lara.

Bertha puts her hands on her hips. “S’pose you’re gonna have to show up and find out, aren’t you?” She waves to the door. “Off you go.”

We follow Bertha through the youth dorms and catch Lucy the elevator down to Supernatural Investigations. To my surprise, Bertha walks us all the way to the VanQuish office.

Maria and my brother are both waiting for us, and Bertha was right—Quinton’s furious. Maria hangs back, looking more disappointed than

anything else.

“Thank you, Bertha,” says Quinton. “Please shut the door on your way out.”

Our dorm leader gives a salute and heads back into the hallway.

As soon as the door shuts, my brother pinches the bridge of his nose. Which he only does when he’s trying *really* hard not to shout.

“Did any of you disobey a direct order to not go after that mural?”

No one answers.

“It’s important that you’re honest with us,” says Maria. “Now’s the time to come clean.”

Maybe they’re angry, but I am too. “It wouldn’t have been necessary if the War Council had done the right thing and helped us.”

“This isn’t a game, Amari!” This time Quinton does shout. “Members of the Bureau have been court-martialed and sent to Blackstone for ignoring less important orders.”

I lift my chin. “I did what I thought was right.”

Quinton just nods. “Well, then I hope you’re happy with the consequences.” My brother pulls his phone out from his pocket to show an Eurg post. It’s from Dylan.

New Message from_League_of_Magicians_Dylan

The League takes your theft of my property as an act of war.

Peace negotiations are over.

“My brother was never going to negotiate,” says Lara, stepping up to my side. “This was always going to end in war. He’s already attacked the Bureau multiple times.”

“He’s just buying time to go after the Wonders,” I add. “You have to know that!”

“Perhaps,” says Maria, moving to stand next to Quinton. “But we’ve been very careful not to provoke him into doing something reckless. We didn’t want him acting out of anger and hurting innocent people.”

“What are you saying?” I ask.

Quinton taps on his phone a few times and brings up the skyline over Atlanta. Roiling black clouds fill the sky. Violent streaks of lightning flash, and thunder booms through the speakers. That’s *my* magic Dylan is using—weather magic. A surge of anger grips me.

“It’s just a storm,” says Lara.

“Is it?” Quinton answers. As he taps on his screen a few more times, a knot of dread forms in my gut.

“Quinton,” Maria says. “Maybe this is enough. They don’t need to know—”

“They do,” Quinton interrupts. “They need to know what happens when you take it upon yourself to make decisions for the entire supernatural world.”

Maria sighs and nods. “Just be easy on them. It wasn’t so long ago that we were in their shoes.”

My brother’s expression softens. “And we learned the hard way, didn’t we?” The next video he shows us is a newscaster, who can barely stand up in the brutal winds. City streets are completely flooded, and small tornadoes rip through neighborhoods.

I just stare because I don’t know what to say.

“Amari.” Maria looks as shaken as I am. “There’s the equivalent of a hurricane happening out there. And hurricanes don’t just appear out of nowhere. Something this dangerous, and so blatantly unnatural, it raises too many questions. It risks the exposure of our world.”

Quinton shakes his head. “We have to report this. And once we do, I don’t know what happens next. Director Van Helsing is on a rampage to find out what Dylan’s post meant. I can’t protect you from this—any of you.”

“It was me,” I say quickly. “Only me—the others had nothing to do with it. They shouldn’t be punished for my mistake.”

“Is that true?” Maria’s eyes move to her sister.

Lara shakes her head. “I agreed to help.”

“Me too,” says Elsie, giving my hand a squeeze.

“We all did,” Jayden adds.

Quinton sighs. “Then return to your dorms. You’re to stay there until further notice.”

“Will we really be kicked out of the Bureau for this?” Elsie asks in a small voice.

It’s Maria who answers. “Depending on how this plays out, we’ll be lucky if that’s all they decide to do.”

“Don’t know what happened back there,” says Bertha in the elevator back to the youth dorms, “but you lot look like you been put through the ringer.

What's all this sulking about?"

"We may not be members of the Bureau much longer," says Elsie.

"That bad?" Bertha asks.

I nod. "That bad."

"Don't assume the worst just yet," says Bertha. "You may take some lumps, but you're still a hero to a lot of folks, and that's got to count for something."

"Hey, Bertha," Lara asks, "do you think we could grab our things from Amari and Elsie's dorm room?"

Bertha frowns. "Quinton gave strict orders to get you all to your rooms. You're under lockdown until Director Van Helsing calls for you."

I glance at Lara, curious what she's up to. Last I checked, the only thing in that room is the mural, and agents are surely coming to haul it away.

"It won't take but a minute." Lara scrunches her face like she's on the verge of tears. "I just want a moment with my friends before, you know, it's too late."

Okay, now I really know something's up. 'Cause that girl isn't much of a crier.

"*Fine.*" Bertha reaches down into her pocket for a tissue. "Don't go to pieces. You're a Van Helsing, for goodness' sake."

"Thank you," Lara says, accepting the tissue and dabbing her eye. When Bertha looks away to tell a kid to stop skateboarding in the hallway, Lara shoots me a wink.

"Two minutes," Bertha announces when we get to my room. "Then I want you back in this hallway."

"Understood," says Lara.

Me and my friends file inside, shutting the door behind us.

"All right, spill it," I say. "What're you up to?"

Lara sets her jaw. "We're going to finish what we started."

"You can't be serious," I say. "We're in enough trouble as it is."

Lara crosses her arms. "All the more reason to find the Wonders."

"She's right," says Elsie. "At this point, that might be our only hope."

"You too?" I ask her. "And you're aware of just how much we're risking?"

Elsie flushes. "I agree with Lara. Dylan was never going to negotiate with the Bureau. And I bet those storms are just to keep the Bureau busy

while he keeps looking for the Wonders. We've got to do whatever we can to stop him."

I turn to Jayden next. "How about you?"

He shrugs and smiles. "Wherever you go, I'll follow."

I try to hide the blush in my cheeks and think. Am I really doing this? Sneaking out when we're literally waiting to be punished for sneaking out is about as foolish a move as I can think of. But what choice do we have?

I take a deep breath. "Let's do it."

"Where do we start looking?" asks Jayden. "According to that Key, the Night Brothers already claimed the Wonders. They coulda hidden them anywhere."

"We're already two steps behind," says Lara. "We need to know everything Dylan knows about the Night Brothers. We can start with his room back at my house. He's got all kinds of magician stuff in there."

"Your family kept it?" I ask.

Lara nods. "Daddy wanted Dylan's stuff thrown out after his arrest last summer, but Mom refused to let anyone near it."

Those words hit close to home. It's the same thing me and Mama did when Quinton went missing. I can't imagine how it must feel for someone you love to *choose* to stay away.

I pull the Lockless Key from my back pocket and head over to the same spot as before. "Hopefully it works better than last time. Take me to Dylan's—"

"Wait!" Lara interrupts. "Set it for my backyard instead. My dad may have put in some extra security, just in case Dylan ever tried to come back for anything."

"Good thinking," I say.

"And be specific," Elsie adds. "Lara isn't the only Lara Van Helsing in the world."

I bite down on my lip, thinking.

"Better hurry, though," Jayden adds, looking back at the door. "Bertha got a nose for mischief."

I nod. "Take me to Lara Van Helsing's backyard at the newly rebuilt Van Helsing estate in Atlanta, Georgia."

I jab the Key into the wall, and the space around it turns to copper. The metal expands until a gleaming metal door emerges.

I shove it open to find pouring rain, so thick I can't see anything beyond it. Thunder booms so loud on the other side that it shakes the lamps on Elsie's nightstand.

In our rush to get going, we forgot about Dylan's storm.

Suddenly the door to our room swings open, Bertha sniffing the air as she steps inside. Her eyes go wide at the sight of the magical doorway on the far wall.

"Should've known you lot would be up to something!"

"Come on!" I shout, diving through the doorway.

Elsie stumbles out after me, and Lara, with her supernatural athleticism, cartwheels to escape Bertha's outstretched hands, then does a flip over the mural, somehow managing to come to a graceful landing right in front of me and Elsie.

That just leaves Jayden. He's unfortunately being blocked by Bertha, who's decided she can at least stop one of us from getting through. But she didn't account for Peek-a-Boo, who pops into view just inches from her face.

The ghost giggles with delight as our dorm leader startles so badly she stumbles onto the mural, landing hard on her butt.

Jayden doesn't hesitate. He zigzags around her and dives through the doorway to join us.

"Close the door!" Elsie shouts as Bertha picks herself up.

Behind her, agents appear. But not just any agents. At the front of the pack is Director Van Helsing and Quinton.

Van Helsing gives an order and agents surge into the room.

Panicking, I snatch the Key from the door. Instantly, the doorway begins to fold in on itself, becoming smaller and smaller. I meet my brother's disbelieving stare as the doorway vanishes entirely.

It feels like a hammer to my conscience, but everything we're doing is going to be worth it. It has to be.



THE FOUR OF US HOLD HANDS AS WE JOG THROUGH THE blinding rain. Strong winds whip around us, nearly knocking me off my feet. Lara leads the way and eventually we end up beneath a covered patio that surrounds a wide pool. The shadow of an enormous house looms above us.

We're dripping wet.

"Do you think the Bureau knows where we are?" I ask. "They got a good look through the doorway."

Lara shakes her head. “Not in this weather. If I didn’t hear you tell the Key to bring us here, *I* wouldn’t have known where we are.”

“It’s a good thing we didn’t go straight to your room,” says Elsie.

I nod, feeling a little less anxious.

“Now we just need to sneak in,” says Jayden.

Lara walks up to the tall glass doors and peers in. The inside of the house is dim. “Looks like Mom’s not home. But the head housekeeper tends to stay late, so we’ll still need to be careful.”

Lara walks over to a small keypad and quickly types in a code. The screen flashes green and she waves us over.

One by one, we slip inside. Once we’re through, Lara shuts the door behind us.

The Van Helsing living room looks like some kind of museum. The ceilings arch high overhead, and an electric fireplace sparkles along the far wall. There’s artwork everywhere—from the paintings and black-and-white family portraits adorning the walls to fancy sculptures and vases in every nook and corner. Weird, futuristic-looking furniture sits at the center of the large room.

And standing on its own tiny stage is a cherry-red sports car.

“Y’all got fancy cars just for decoration?” Jayden asks.

Lara shrugs. “Mom hates that thing, but Daddy insists it’s a classic. It was actually a compromise because he wanted to display one of the old war tanks he collects.”

Jayden gapes.

Lara points around the bend. “My room is over here.”

We trail Lara through a short hallway into a room I’ve seen in her Eurg messages. Except it turns out what I saw was only a sliver. This place is the size of my entire apartment.

Jayden lets his eyes drift upward. “Hold up, your bedroom got an upstairs?”

“Technically it’s a loft,” answers Lara, starting to look a little embarrassed.

“Guys,” I say. “Remember why we’re here.”

“Sorry,” Jayden says, scratching the back of his head.

“Let’s start by getting dry,” I say, pointing to the closet.

Me, Elsie, and Lara slip inside and change into jeans and T-shirts. Much as I hate to admit, her fancy Duboise brand jeans really are pretty

comfy. Especially when they adjust to the perfect size. Once we're done, Lara finds some unisex Junior Agent training sweats for Jayden. He's lucky she wears them baggy.

The moment he steps back out of the closet, a knock sounds on the door. We freeze.

Then Elsie frowns. "If those were agents, I doubt they'd be knocking."

"Miss Lara?" calls a voice. "That you in there? Nobody told us the family was stopping by tonight. Tracking water all through the house. This is highly irregular!"

"Our housekeeper, Mrs. Karch," Lara mutters. "My mortal enemy." She clears her throat and yells, "It's just me. I needed some clothes for . . . an Eurg post."

"Uh-huh," says Mrs. Karch. "Alls I know is there better not be any boys in there. There'll be no hanky-panky on my watch."

Lara darts over the door and just barely cracks it open. "See, it's just me."

"I heard more voices in there than just yours," says Mrs. Karch.

Even from here I can see the housekeeper craning her neck to get a better look inside. I try to keep myself out of view and tug on Jayden's shirt so he does the same.

"Let me fetch my phone," Mrs. Karch continues. "Make sure Mr. Van Helsing knows what's going on. Bad enough he has to deal with that son of his, and here you come sneaking in at all hours. If you think you can fool old Karch, you got another thing coming, missy!"

Elsie goes over to join Lara at the door. "Hi, Mrs. Karch. I'm here too."

"Miss Rodriguez!" exclaims the housekeeper. "So you two really have gone and made up. Why, I ain't laid eyes on you since you were as tall as my hip bone. You be careful with this one. She starts getting too big-headed again and you cut her loose, ya hear?"

"Will do," Elsie assures her.

"Please don't tell my parents we're here," pleads Lara. "They already think I'm vain enough."

"I'm of a mind to agree," the housekeeper answers. "Storm of the century out there and you worried about taking a cute photo. Your generation and that social media!"

Mrs. Karch shuffles away from the door and Lara quickly locks it. “That was a close one,” she says.

“You think she gonna keep quiet?” asks Jayden.

Lara shrugs. “Depends on her mood, I guess. As you can see, we don’t exactly get along—never have.”

“Sounds like we’d better get what we came for, then,” I say. “Where’s Dylan’s room?”

“I’ll show you.” Lara goes over to her desk and brings back an iPad. “I’ve got the plans saved from when my parents did the rebuild after the hybrid attack last summer.”

As Lara shows us the blueprints I resist the impulse to point out that their house has actual wings.

“Dylan’s room is part of the older section of the house.” Lara traces the route with her finger. “Other than nosy Mrs. Karch, nobody will care if they catch me walking through the halls. But they might check in with my parents if they see a bunch of kids they don’t know.”

I study the diagram myself. “Maybe you should walk ahead and make sure the coast is clear. We’ll follow a little ways behind.”

Lara nods. “If I start talking to anyone, for any reason, you guys hide. We’ll only get one shot at this. So we’d better make it count.”

Lara looks both ways before stepping into the hallway. Then she waves for us to follow.

We move through the first two hallways easily. Other than the wind and rains whipping against the house, it’s quiet. Next we take a staircase down to what’s clearly the original part of the house. Instead of everything looking super modern and futuristic, the ornate moldings and wood paneling almost remind me of the old-fashioned feel of Chamberlain Manor.

Out of nowhere, Lara shouts. In a split second, Jayden has slipped behind a curtain, Elsie’s ducked into a small closet, and I’ve dropped to the floor and squeezed beneath an armchair.

“False alarm,” Lara whispers.

I groan. Getting under that chair wasn’t easy.

Lara’s still staring down a hallway when I get back to my feet. “Thought I heard footsteps. Mrs. Karch must be around here somewhere.”

I stare after her. A branch scrapes the window. “That what you heard?”

She shrugs. “I dunno—maybe?”

We turn one more corner and suddenly we're standing before a door covered in yellow police tape with CRIME SCENE and DO NOT ENTER written in big black letters.

"We'd better get inside before anyone sees," says Elsie.

Lara nods and takes hold of the door handle. She waits a few seconds, and when nothing happens, she pulls it open.

The room is dark, but not so much that I can't tell it's extremely tidy. I move to go inside but Lara lifts a hand to stop me. She takes off one of her Sky Sprints and tosses it into the room.

Five different Stun Stick blasts fire simultaneously, zapping the shoe. Only they aren't ordinary Stun Sticks—they must've been modified to do real harm. Black smoke rises from the sneaker.

"Booby-trapped." Lara smiles sadly. "A stupid game Dylan and I used to play to keep each other out of our rooms. At first it was fun to try and steal something from the other's room, just to prove we could. But his traps started getting too dangerous, so I quit. Now that I know how much he was hiding, I understand why."

Jayden pokes his head in next. "Think there's any more traps? Hey, Peek, how 'bout you take a look?"

Peek-a-Boo shimmers into existence wearing a sleeping cap. "Do I have to? I'm *tired*. Don't you guys have a bedtime?"

"Do this for us and you can go right back to sleep, a'ight?" Jayden asks.

"Fine." The ghost floats lazily into the room. Nothing happens.

"Happy?" Peek-a-Boo sticks out his tongue and vanishes.

The four of us duck into Dylan's room and shut the door. The place feels like a library, with bookshelves lining all four walls. I glance around. Most of the books are about magiciancraft.

"I didn't expect everything to be so neat," says Elsie. "Doesn't exactly give off an evil lair vibe."

Lara crosses her arms. "My dad is obsessive about things being orderly. Kinda rubbed off on us too."

"These books don't help us," I say. "It's not like there's a textbook you can buy that reveals the Night Brothers' biggest secrets. Did Dylan keep a journal? Something he might've used while he was scheming with Moreau?"

“I wish I knew.” Lara sighs. “We’d grown apart by then. He got distant and I resented him for it. So things just sorta stayed like that.”

“Well, let’s search the place and see what we find,” I say. “It’s not like we’ve got any other leads to go on.”

Each of us takes a corner and we start pulling every book off the shelf to see if one might be a diary in disguise. What we get instead is a ton of surprises. A magical recipe book fills the room with an apple pie scent. And I’m sure we’re about to be caught when Jayden opens a book on animal magic, and a lion’s roar echoes down the hall. When a book with a silver-foil cover escapes up to the ceiling and refuses to come down, we’re positive we’ve found the diary.

It takes Lara using her superhuman athleticism to leap high enough to grab it. Too bad the book just turned out to be *A Treatise on Gravity Magick*.

After nearly an hour, half the books are still unchecked, and it’s starting to feel hopeless.

That’s when the door swings open and Mrs. Karch stands in the doorway, a cell phone to her ear. “Hello, please put me through to Director Van Helsing.”

Lara stumbles over to her. “No, you can’t!”

“And why can’t I?” Mrs. Karch wears a look of triumph that’s hard to understand. Surely she can’t hate Lara so much that getting her in trouble gives the lady that much joy.

But then Mrs. Karch adds, “You and that awful brother of yours had no qualms about blaming me for things, did you? Didn’t matter if it was true or not.”

I can tell from Lara’s expression that the housekeeper isn’t making that up.

“You’re right,” says Lara. “We were horrible, and you didn’t deserve half the things we did to you.”

“Only half?” asks Mrs. Karch.

“Any of the things we did to you.” Lara shoots a glance in my direction and her shoulders slump. “I’m realizing more and more that I haven’t always been a good person. And I’m trying to be better, I really am. But I guess the best way of doing that is to say I’m sorry. And I really am. Turns out the ‘girl who has everything’ is just an insecure bully.”

Mrs. Karch stares, lowering the phone. "You almost look like you mean that."

"She does," I follow. "And I'm saying that as someone who used to hate her guts. Do you know she tried to jump me in an alley?"

Mrs. Karch laughs. "Now that sounds more like the brat I know."

I can't help laughing too. Even Lara chuckles.

"She really does mean it, though," says Elsie. "It's why we're friends again."

Mrs. Karch gives Lara another hard look. "S'pose you'll tell me, then, why you're making a mess in this room? One that's clearly off-limits?"

"We're looking for a journal my brother might've kept," says Lara. "He's planning something even worse than the storms outside, and we're hoping to find a clue how to stop him."

The housekeeper raises an eyebrow. "Ain't this something your dad should be looking into? Or VanQuish? You four are just kids—barely even teenagers."

"Believe me, we've tried to convince them," I say. "But they're set on doing things their own way. So we're here doing whatever we can to help."

"Well," says Mrs. Karch, putting a hand on her hip. "I'll tell you this much. Didn't surprise me one bit when Dylan turned out to be different than everyone thought. He was always 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir,' around your parents. 'Please' and 'thank you' around company. But I'd see the anger come out when he thought nobody else was looking. Now, Miss Lara could be petty, but that boy was downright cruel. If I was a betting woman, I'd wager this room is much the same—what he wants people to see. He'd have someplace out of sight where he could let the real Dylan come out. Someplace far away from here."

Mrs. Karch's words get me thinking, and the answer is so obvious I could kick myself. "Of course he wouldn't hide a journal here," I say. "I can't believe I didn't realize that."

"Whatchu thinking?" asks Jayden.

"I'm thinking Dylan literally showed me where he keeps things hidden," I say.

"Do you maybe plan on telling the rest of us where that is," says Lara. "Or do we have to guess?"

"The old Van Helsing lake house," I say. "It's where he took me to show off his magic, back when his being a magician was still a secret. He

crafted an entire forest illusion. It must've taken him years."

"S'pose you all had better get going, then," says Mrs. Karch. "I'll get things straightened up in here."

Lara steps closer to the housekeeper. "Thanks for helping us. I *really* appreciate it."

Mrs. Karch smiles.

I pull the Lockless Key from my pocket and jab it into the nearest bookcase. "Take me to the attic of the old Van Helsing lake house."

Just like last time, a metallic door expands into view and I pull it open to reveal a wide, empty attic. The forest illusion is gone. I half expected that to be the case, but it still makes me feel a little sad. Dylan was my friend then, or so I thought, and I still remember how awed I felt at the sight of what our shared illusion magic could do.

"What's that?" says Elsie. "Over there?"

I step through the door into the attic and squint. In the distance, something small shimmers. I take one cautious step after another until I realize what I'm seeing.

An Amari blossom. It's all that's left from what used to be an entire forest. Maybe it's because Dylan and I created it together, using both our magic. Maybe my magic kept it alive.

I crouch in front of it. The glass petals reflect a light that seems to come from nowhere. I search the area around the illusion until I find a latch and pull it open.

It's a trapdoor. Beneath it lies a small box full to the brim with books and papers.

"I've found something," I call. "Come here—and bring the Key from the door."

While my friends make their way over, I start sifting through the box.

Mrs. Karch was right. Here is where Dylan Van Helsing hid his darkness.

An angry drawing of his family with everyone X'ed out but him. Ripped up VanQuish magazine covers. And, at the very bottom, a leather-bound book with no title.

"*A Book of Rants*," says Lara. "Maria bought one for each of us. It was supposed to help us deal with the pressure of being a Van Helsing. Basically when you're feeling overwhelmed, you just shout into it. She said

having an outlet had helped her. I never touched mine, and I assumed the same was true for Dylan.”

Now that I’m holding something so personal in my hands, it feels wrong to open it. At the same time, this might be our only chance to find out where the Night Brothers hid the Wonders.

So I do open it.

The first page is titled *Why?* And from the pages Dylan’s tearful voice echoes in the empty attic.

“Why do I have to have magic? I hate being different, and I hate hiding it all the time. Sometimes I think about telling Dad, but I can already picture his disgust. His disappointment. The same goes for Mom and Lara. Only Maria understands but she’s never here. Sometimes I wish I was someplace else too.”

I glance around at my friends until I find Lara wiping her eyes.

“He’s not lying,” she whispers. “You saw how I treated you last summer. I wouldn’t have been kind to him had I known. It’s just what I was taught, that magicians are bad. It doesn’t excuse anything but . . . I don’t know.”

Elsie gives Lara’s hand a squeeze. I flip through the pages, skimming the titles until I find my own name. It stops me cold.

“Today has been the most incredible day. I actually feel good. Like really, really good. I found another magician! She’s my age and really pretty. Moreau is wary about bringing her into our plans, but once she knows the truth I know she’ll understand why we have to protect magicians from everyone else. The other kids are so cruel. I barely know her, and I want to protect her. Maybe it’s because we’re the born magicians of this age. She and I are connected.”

So many emotions roil through me. Because it’s proof that Dylan did care once. But even I couldn’t save him from his darkness and his need to lash out. I can’t help wondering what would’ve happened if we’d met sooner, before Moreau turned him to foul magick. Before he let it rule him completely.

“You gotta keep going,” says Jayden.

“Right,” I say, blinking back my own tears.

This time I flip the page until I find a title that reads, *Moreau’s Secrets*.

“I’m the one who is risking everything. I’m a Van Helsing! Doesn’t that old fool know how much I’m putting on the line for his plan to work? So he can have the Black Book and the Black Key, and resurrect Vladimir. Yet he still keeps things from me. Puts his trust elsewhere. Maybe it’s time I start looking out for myself. There’s a spell that can strip the magic from another’s blood. It’s a brutal spell, but maybe it’s time I learn it—”

The slamming of a door gets my attention.

“Who’s there?” I call.

Shadows melt from the edge of the room, and a cloud of darkness forms in front of us. A glowing white smile emerges in the gloom beneath floating eyes. “The boss said you might show up here.”



I GRAB MY STUN STICK AND AIM IT, BUT THE UNWANTED retreats into the shadows at the edge of the room before I can get a shot off. Lara steps up beside me, pointing her own Stun Stick, but she’s facing the same problem. The shadows move like liquid over the wall to meld together into a giant blob of darkness.

“A Black Dread . . .” Lara groans. “What are we supposed to do against that thing?”

“Nothing,” the creature hisses. It leaps forward, opening its dark mouth to shriek so loudly I drop to my knees, covering my ears. A bolt of shadow surges out of its body, striking Lara in the chest. She drops like a stone, unconscious.

“Lara!” I scream, turning to face her. It’s the only reason the next bolt misses me. I shake Lara hard, praying she’s okay. “Get up! You’ve gotta move—”

Two more bolts race out of the gloom. They avoid me, but a quick glance over my shoulder shows Jayden stepping in front of Elsie to protect her, only to be struck down by the shadows.

“Amari!” Elsie’s eyes go wide, and she points in my direction.

A shadow punches through my chest. Before I can scream, numbness floods my middle, spilling into my limbs. And everything fades to black.

I wake to find my friends lying on the floor around me. Beyond them, a cage of pulsing shadow surrounds us. But there’s no sign of the Black Dread that kicked our butts.

Quickly, I crawl over to Elsie and give her a shake. “Hey, wake up.”

But she’s still out cold. I pat her pockets for the Lockless Key but it’s not there. I try Jayden and Lara next, but they don’t have it either.

We’re trapped.

I will myself to stay calm and think. There’s got to be a way out.

I move to the black cage and test it. The bars look shadowy but are solid, and no matter how hard I yank on them they don’t give. I’m also not small enough to squeeze through.

Okay, new plan. “Peek-a-Boo!” I whisper-shout, glancing toward the attic door. “Can you hear me?”

No answer. “Peek-a-Boo!” I say, a little louder.

“Stop all that racket!” shouts a NightWalker, shoving open the door. He’s got to be seven feet tall, with gleaming eyes. Where the Black Dread was all mist and shadow, this NightWalker is solid, with thick black smoke wafting off him.

Three more follow behind him, but they stay closer to the entrance. “Nobody’s coming to save you,” one taunts.

“What are you going to do with us?” I ask.

“Hand you over, of course,” says the nearest NightWalker. “Our Black Dread friend is writing a message in shadow to the Van Helsing kid

himself. That one wants you bad. Can't say why, though. What happens after we're rewarded isn't our business."

"Listen," I say. "I don't know what Dylan has promised you, but you've got to let us go. He's planning something awful—something that could end the supernatural world as we know it."

"We know full well what he's planning," calls a NightWalker by the door. "And we're all for it. Tear it all down, I say. What's the supernatural world ever done for UnWanted?"

"You can't mean that," I say. "Innocent folks will disappear forever. Look what he did to Merlin, and he was on your side."

The NightWalker leans into the bars, close enough that I choke and cough on the thick black smoke his body gives off. "Merlin *said* he was on our side. Big difference between saying and doing, isn't there?"

A cheer goes up from the other NightWalkers, but they fall silent when the Black Dread floats back into the attic like a dark cloud.

"What did Van Helsing say?" asks the NightWalker. "Was he pleased?"

The Black Dread rumbles, "One of his lackeys wrote back to say he's asleep, recovering from a nasty hex, and wasn't to be disturbed."

If the NightWalker nearest to me had a face, I think his jaw would be hanging open. "You mean to tell me . . . we caught the magician gal he's been on about for days and he can't be bothered to answer our message?"

"Do not speak ill of our Master," warns the Black Dread. "It takes a terrible toll to explore the Night Brothers' old haunts, yet he does so for our benefit. So we might take our rightful places in the world at the side of magiciankind."

It's just like we thought. The Night Brothers found the Wonders first and hid them. And now Dylan's visiting their old hideouts to look for them. Only Vladimir and Moreau must've put curses in place to keep people out.

But what if we're too late? What if he's resting because he's already found them?

"My brother left you on read, huh?"

I turn and find Lara leaning up, rubbing her forehead.

The NightWalker bangs hard on the shadow cage.

The Black Dread expands, covering the room in darkness. "Say what you want. But if all goes to plan, there won't be a supernatural Atlanta left for you to go home to."

My heart thunders in my chest. We need to know how close Dylan has come to tracking down the Wonders. If he's still taking the risk of exploring Night Brother haunts, he probably hasn't found the Lens of Increase yet. But that doesn't mean he hasn't found the other Wonders. And if that's true, he can always rip them apart to make an anti-magick bomb like he did in the Congress Room. I need to know what he's got.

But how can I if we're stuck in this cage?

Think, Amari . . . Maybe I can pick his brain the same way he tried to pick mine back at Chamberlain Manor. It's a long shot, but it's the only thing I can think to do.

"Lara," I whisper. "I'm going to try something. Can you keep an eye on Jayden and Elsie?"

The girl raises an eyebrow. "And where are you going?"

I dig into my pocket and grab my Victor's Ring to show her. "Gonna try something *really* reckless."

Lara hesitates but nods.

So I lie down and slide the Victor's Ring onto my finger. The familiar rush of magic calms me and I take a deep breath. Please let this ring have enough magic for this spell to work. Everything depends on it.

I close my eyes and think. How did Dylan summon me to a Dream Meet? And can it work in reverse?

He said something about us having a connection, and that me thinking about him made that connection stronger somehow. So I clear my head and focus on Dylan Van Helsing. From the first time I saw him last summer at the welcome ceremony to us being here in this attic. I think about him betraying me and working with Moreau to steal the Black Book and Black Key, and how I trapped him with lightning when he tried to steal my magic.

A faint tingle echoes inside the ring.

I concentrate harder, focusing on our duels during the Great Game. How close he came to killing me. And just how close *I* came to destroying him during the final challenge while I was lost in foul magick.

Energy pulses through the Victor's Ring.

I see myself handing over my second ring to save Elsie. The ring that made him the winner of the Great Game.

I feel myself start to drift off at the memory of the Black Crown being placed on his head.

And then I see him standing in front of me, wearing that same Crown. He looks confused, searching his surroundings until he sees me.

He cracks a smile.

“I don’t know how you managed this exactly,” says Dylan. “But I’m impressed.”

It’s all I can do not to shout with triumph. I’ve done it! I pulled Dylan into my own Dream Meet. We’re standing in the grassy field where we fought so hard in the final challenge of the Great Game. Black storm clouds threaten overhead, and swirling winds whip across my face.

Except our surroundings suddenly shift, and now we’re in a training room at the Bureau. We’re both holding Stun Sticks and wearing Junior Agent uniforms. I remember this moment; it was right before our Stun Stick duel in the finale last summer during tryouts. We were practicing the Helsing technique.

As if the sudden shift weren’t weird enough, sections of the walls begin to phase in and out. Almost like a glitch in a video game. What’s happening?

Dylan seems just as alarmed. “You shouldn’t have brought me here.”

“Is this happening because of you?”

He shakes his head. “Playing with magic you don’t understand isn’t wise—” He doubles over, gripping his head with both hands.

Before I even realize what I’m doing, I step closer, but he backs up, wary. “You’re going to be the end of both of us.”

“What’s wrong with you?” I ask.

He winces, still holding his head. “Like you care.”

The world around us shifts again, only this time it isn’t a complete change of scenery. Grass grows around my feet, but the padded walls of the training gym still surround us. Rain begins to fall, but it’s coming from the light fixtures overhead.

“Dylan,” I ask. “What’s happening?”

“Wearing the Crown comes with a cost,” he snaps. “A terrible one.”

I shake my head. “What are you saying?”

He straightens, but I can still see the pain etched on his face. “That I don’t care. I’ll pay whatever price that gets me what I want.”

“You’re not making any sense,” I say. “You want magicians to be free, but what you did in the Congress Room only makes the world hate magicians even more. Can’t you see that?”

“So what?” His eyes narrow. “Power is the only thing anyone respects. The supernatural world doesn’t have to love us, but they *will* fear us. And that fear will keep them in line.”

Clouds fill the top of the training room and I decide to make my move—the entire reason I tried this Dream Meet in the first place. Last time, Dylan used our connection to pull an image of Quinton from my head, and even a glimpse of Chamberlain Manor. This time I’m the one fishing for information.

“The Bureau knows you’re after the Wonders,” I say. “The Lens of Increase specifically. So you might as well give up.”

“Never!” he shouts. “You won’t beat me to the Wonders. Because you don’t know where they’re hidden.”

Good. If I can get him thinking about where the Wonders are, maybe I can get an answer out of him.

“We do!” I lie. “Just because Moreau didn’t trust you with the location doesn’t mean we couldn’t figure it out.”

It’s a weak attempt. But with Dylan clearly struggling, I’m hoping it’s enough.

Dylan steps forward, fury written on his face. “The old man was a fool! I was the one worthy of that inheritance, not—” His eyes snap to mine. The corner of his mouth tilts upward. “Very clever, Amari. I almost fell for it. You’ve got no idea where the Wonders are hidden, do you? You’ve brought me here to try to get information.”

The realization seems to focus his mind, and the dream shifts to my apartment. It’s where he came to visit me the day I ran away from the Bureau. There’s no sign of the glitches that plagued the last location. If I didn’t know better, I’d think we were truly back in my living room.

“Why do you keep looking for me?” I ask. “What is it you want?”

He blows out a long, slow breath. When he speaks, his voice is almost pleading. “I want you to understand why I’m doing this. It’s for both of us. For *all* magicians. I won’t need foul magick forever. Once I have the Lens, no one will dare challenge me. I can protect us all.”

“You’re a liar,” I snap. “And the saddest part is that you can’t even see it. You’re the strongest magician who’s ever lived. You’re already strong enough to protect magicians; what you’re looking for is the power to make the supernatural world cease to exist at all.”

“And why should it exist?” Dylan shouts. “I’ve spent my entire life loathing who I am and what being a magician means in the supernatural world! Why should I care for a world that hates me?”

A jarring mix of emotions swirls within me. As much as I don’t agree, I do understand. I’ve been the outcast before, and I’ve lashed out when I got fed up. But that doesn’t make it right.

I bury those intense feelings and take the moment to try something desperate. Dylan learned that Quinton was awake by asking me a question—getting me thinking about my brother. Well, Dylan basically admitted that he knows who inherited the Wonders from Moreau.

I step forward. “Tell me who Moreau entrusted with the Wonders!”

Dylan flinches, and an image flickers into existence between us. Someone I recognize. It’s Moreau’s apprentice, the man who spent years inside Blackstone Prison impersonating him.

The image vanishes as quickly as it appears.

Dylan and I stare at one another.

He snarls. “Wake up!”

My eyes pop open. My friends are gathered around me.

“Finally,” says Lara. “You didn’t tell me you were going to take a friggin’ nap.”

“I know who Moreau trusted with the Wonders.” I blow out a sigh. “Though that doesn’t matter as long we’re stuck in this cage.”

“About that . . .” Elsie grins and opens her hand, where a tiny ball of darkness bounces happily.

“Shadow!” I exclaim as the ball hops into my lap. “But how are you here?”

Jayden nods to the dark figure just beyond the bars. The NightWalker waves shyly.

“Newton FearDrinker?” I say. “What are you doing mixed up with Dylan? Don’t you know he’s trying to destroy the supernatural world?”

“Didn’t know nothin’ about any evil plot,” he stammers. “I swear it! I was just minding my alley when some fellow NightWalkers asked if I wanted to make a quick buck. The scares have been a bit slow with everybody staying in ’cause of the storm, so I figured why not? I thought maybe I’d be helping a fellow UnWanted move some furniture into a comfy cellar or an abandoned mall. Not to say that I don’t have a grudge against

the Bureau for chasing me out of my alley, but that Dylan fella is a bit extreme.”

At first, I think there’s no way that story could be true, but Newton really does seem like the type to fall into villainy by accident.

“Okay,” I say. “Well, don’t forget you owe us a favor for keeping and then returning your shadowy ball of terror to you.”

“Already on it,” says Elsie. “We were just waiting for you to wake up so we can use the Key.”

I lean forward. “You have it?”

Newton looks around and then passes the Lockless Key to me through the bars.

“What about you?” I ask him. “The others are gonna be furious when they find out you helped us.”

“Oh, I plan on catching a lift with you guys.” Newton folds himself through the shadowy bars. “Been looking for a way to ditch this bunch all day.”

“Hey!” shouts a voice behind us.

Quickly, I jab the Key into the floor. “Take us back to Lara Van Helsing’s bedroom.”

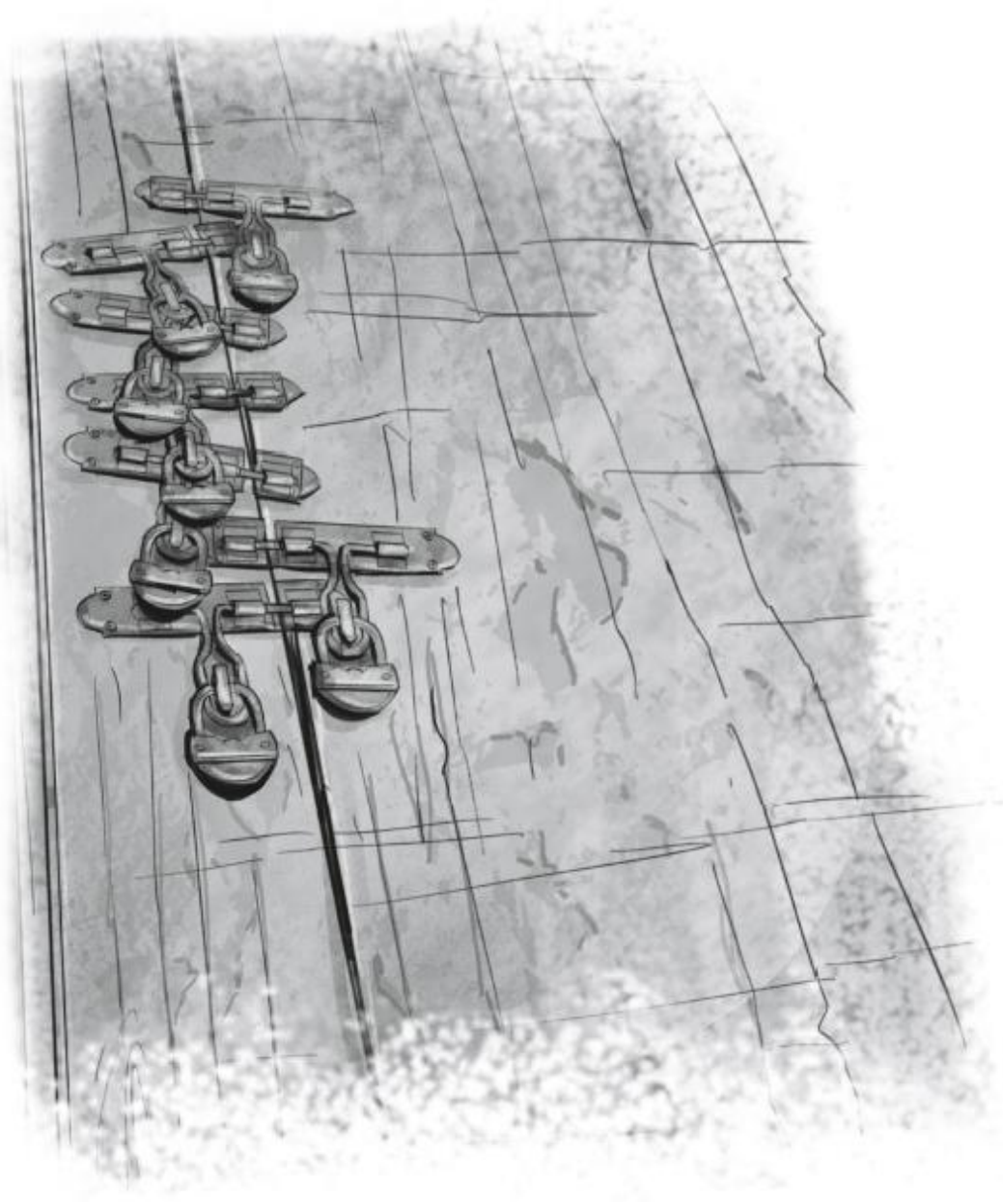
As the door emerges beneath me, streaks of shadow shoot in our direction. Most ping harmlessly against the bars but one manages to slip through, and I’ve got to duck to keep it from going through my head.

As soon as the door is formed, I yank it open and slide through—

And tumble from the ceiling down onto Lara’s plush bed in her loft. One by one my friends follow, with Newton coming through last. Another shadow appears behind him, hovering above the open door.

“Grab the Key!” I shout.

Newton stretches his shadowy arm back to pull the Lockless Key free and the door begins to fold, right in the face of the Black Dread.



WE TAKE ALL OF ONE MINUTE TO GET OVER HOW close we came to having those UnWantededs follow us. Then I explain everything that happened in the Dream Meet with Dylan. When we climb down from the loft to brainstorm our next move, Lara tells Newton that he and Shadow can lie low in her room for a while, just in case those NightWalkers show up at his alley looking for payback.

Newton happily accepts, slipping under the bed with Shadow for a well-deserved nap.

Me and my friends sit in a circle on the floor.

“Just to be clear,” says Elsie. “We need to find a way back into the Bureau unnoticed, so we can sneak down to Blackstone Prison—which is a restricted floor that’s only accessible by elevator . . . and not just any elevator but Lord Kensington, the chief’s personal elevator. Even if we pull that off somehow, we’d still need to convince Moreau’s apprentice—who hates Amari—to tell us where the Night Brothers hid the Wonders? Do I have that right?”

“Pretty much,” I say, deflated.

Lara cocks her head to one side, thinking. “Who’s to say Moreau’s apprentice is even still at Blackstone?”

“Why wouldn’t he be?” I ask.

“Harlowe,” Lara answers. “That faun hates magicians more than anyone. What if she moved him to wherever she put all the League magicians she kidnapped? Maybe she wanted them all in one place.”

Jayden frowns. “But Dylan just freed those magicians. That apprentice could already be with the League.”

I shake my head. “The Black Dread said that Dylan had gotten hexed searching locations that once belonged to the Night Brothers. Why do that if there’s someone around who could just tell him where they are?”

“Well,” says Lara. “There’s one way to know for sure if Moreau’s apprentice is still in Blackstone. I can get onto my dad’s computer. It’s in his study.”

“That’s perfect!” I say.

“Thing is,” Lara adds. “He’ll get an alert on his phone the moment we log in. After Dylan used tech magic to wreck the Bureau last summer, the IT guys installed a ton of new security features.”

“Then we’ll just have to be prepared to make a quick escape.” I hold up the Lockless Key.

“As long as you’re sure,” says Lara. “Follow me.”

Now that Mrs. Karch knows we’re here and what we’re up to, we don’t have to be quite so sneaky. At least until we get to Director Van Helsing’s home office. Something tells me the housekeeper might have something to say about us looking up classified information on her watch. Especially when it’s sure to bring a squadron of agents coming after us.

Once we reach the wooden doors, Lara slips inside. The rest of us wait for her to say the coast is clear.

“So far, so good,” whispers Elsie.

“This is still the easy part,” I remind her.

Lara pokes her head back through the door and waves us in. Director Van Helsing has a cool setup, with a large, curved monitor on his desk and even more screens covering the opposite wall. He can keep an eye on a dozen different missions from the comfort of his own home.

Lara plops onto the big cushy chair behind the desk and the rest of us find a spot beside her. She pulls the keyboard close and taps enter, and the log-in screen blinks into view.

Username: _____

Password: _____

“Last chance to back out,” says Lara. “Any takers?”

We all shake our heads.

“Let’s just be quick,” I say.

“Gotcha.” Lara types in her dad’s information and taps the enter key again. There’s a chime and Lara blows out a nervous breath that mists the air. She’s still showing the effects of Lucas’s ice curse. “We’re on the clock.”

Wallpaper featuring Director Van Helsing posing beside Merlin appears onscreen. The sight sends a pang of sadness through me.

Lara grabs the mouse and clicks on an app called Prisoner Management. A search bar pops up.

Look Up Prisoner by Name: _____

Elsie frowns. “We don’t actually know his name, though, do we?”

“No,” I say. “Is there another way to search?”

Lara clicks on a different tab.

Look Up Prisoner by Location: _____

“Type in *Blackstone* and see what comes up,” I say.

“Already on it.” Lara finds Blackstone in the drop-down menu and brings up a list of all current prisoners’ names, ages, sex, and races. “Guys, I don’t see any humans listed.”

Elsie gasps. “The webcam just turned on!”

A window opens up onscreen, and Director Van Helsing’s stern face appears. “Lara? Is that you?”

Lara ignores the question and continues scrolling through the names. “Not a good time, Daddy.”

Director Van Helsing presses his lips into a thin line. “Sneaking out with that Peters girl? What’s gotten into you? Give me one reason I shouldn’t send agents there right now to arrest you.”

Lara doesn’t even look up. “Because you’ve already disowned Dylan and Maria. I’m the only kid you’ve got left.”

He flinches. The Director might be proud and stubborn to a fault, but that couldn’t have been easy to hear. He leans back, shaking his head. After a moment he says, “What is it you’re looking for?”

The question stuns all of us.

Lara finally meets her dad’s eyes. “Where was Moreau’s apprentice transferred?”

“Harlowe had him sent to the Sightless Depths only days ago,” says the Director. “Why?”

We look at one another. The Sightless Depths might be the worst place in all the supernatural world—it’s where the worst of the worst criminals get sent. I might’ve guessed that’s where Moreau’s apprentice was, but I don’t think I wanted to believe it.

“Just research.” The ghost of a smile lights Lara’s face. Director Van Helsing is about to ask another question but Lara says, “Thanks, Daddy.” And she turns off the computer.

“We need to get going,” says Lara. “In case he changes his mind and sends agents here anyway.”

“Let’s go someplace we can think,” I say. “We’ve got some decisions to make.”

“Maybe somewhere the Bureau don’t know about?” Jayden suggests.

Lara adds, “And someplace my brother won’t think to look for us either.”

“I’ve got a place.” I head to the nearest wall and jab in the Key. “Take me to Lucas and Hannah’s subway hideout.”

The door opens and we step through, the hum of subway cars rumbling on the other side of the wall. We all stand around, quiet. Nobody’s feeling all that cheerful given the news we just received.

Jayden breaks the silence. “This night has been wild enough. We really ’bout to go to the Sightless Depths next?”

“That’s where Moreau’s apprentice is being held,” I say. “And only he knows where the Night Brothers hid the Wonders. We’re so close!”

“Are we?” asks Elsie. “It’s not like we can just walk in there and walk back out. It’s a prison.”

“It’s worse than a prison,” says Lara. “It’s a prison guarded by goblinfolk. They aren’t exactly known for their hospitality.”

Elsie turns her gaze to me. “Don’t suppose you know how Dylan broke out?”

“Cozmo,” I say. “But I doubt he’d be willing to share how he did it.”

“Can’t we use the Key?” asks Jayden. “Just ask it to take us to Moreau’s apprentice?”

“I thought about that,” I say. “But it’ll be pitch-black. There’s no way to know who we’ll find on the other side of the door. We could be giving an escape route to the very worst criminals to ever live.”

“I know of a safer way,” says Lara. “But you all aren’t going to like it.”

Elsie frowns. “From the tone of your voice, I already don’t like it.”

“Let’s hear it,” I say.

“Visitation,” answers Lara.

Jayden scratches the back of his head, looking confused. “As in prisoner visitation?”

“That’s right,” says Lara. “Around Christmastime I got it in my head that I wanted to see my brother. I wanted to understand why he’d betrayed the Bureau. Why he’d turned his back on our family. But then I found out they don’t bring the prisoners up to see you. They make you go down to the prisoners, and I totally chickened out.”

“Don’t blame you,” says Jayden. “Who wanna be somewhere like that?”

“Well, I’m going.” I try to hide the wobble in my knees, but I think my friends notice. Still, one by one, they nod.

Last summer, I read in *Sovereign Cities of the Supernatural World* that the Royal Kingdom of Hobgoblins lies inside the Mammoth Caves, the longest cave system in the world. The Sightless Depths lies in the lowest cavern and only has two entrances: a gaping pit next to the Buried Throne in the underground throne room of the Goblin King, and a second, much smaller pit in a tunnel reserved for visitors.

We use the Lockless Key to arrive at the underground tunnel that contains the latter. It's surprisingly bright for this deep underground. Glowing stones line the ceiling of the wide tunnel. Train tracks split the space in half. On one side is an empty seating area beneath a large sign that reads *International Railways Station—Sightless Depths Visitors' Center*. It's covered in cobwebs.

On the other side of the tracks is a small booth carved into the stone wall. A goblin naps on the counter. Farther down the tunnel, a large wooden trapdoor is set into the floor. That must be the visitors' entrance. I shiver.

I give the counter a hard knock and the goblin startles awake. He's wearing a wrinkled uniform with a badge that reads *Detention Officer*.

"You lot arrive on the train?" The goblin's yellow eyes look especially bright against his pale green fur. "Nah, I'd have heard a train coming through." He sighs. "Been ages since I last seen a train."

"We teleported in," I say.

"Fancy," says the goblin, impressed. "You here to visit someone?"

"Um, yes," I say.

"Name?" the goblin asks.

"We don't know his name," says Elsie. "But he's a magician, recently transferred."

"Oh, I don't actually need a name," says the goblin. "Just curious is all. Hard enough keeping track of who's still breathing down there. Can tell you this much—recently transported inmates tend to congregate here." The goblin points to a prison map at the back of the booth. It's set behind a pane of glass. "Those tunnels are a great place to hide from the scarier, much older things down there."

"How scary we talking?" asks Jayden.

"Things like you wouldn't believe," says the goblin. "It's why no one ever comes to visit."

"Are there any safety measures in place to make sure we're okay down there?" Elsie asks hopefully.

The goblin reaches beneath the counter for a candle. He slides it over to us. "Everything below shies away from light on account of being in the dark so long. Keep the candle lit and you should be fine."

Lara picks up the candle to examine it. "What if this thing blows out?"

"I'd strongly advise against letting that happen. Especially since it can only be lit once. We save money by only buying defective candles."

Elsie crosses her arms. "That's horrible! We could get hurt down there. Or lost."

"Well," says the goblin. "I'd advise against both of those as well."

"This can't be legal," says Lara. "The Bureau—"

"Let me stop you there," the goblin interrupts. "The Royal Kingdom of Hobgoblins recognizes no authority but His Royal Deviousness, the Goblin King. Be glad it ain't him sending you down. You wouldn't even get the candle."

"Can we have a moment to think this over?" I ask.

The goblin shrugs. "No fur off my back. Shift's not over till midnight. Should you decide to tempt fate and risk a gruesome end, let me know. There are maps available for your perusal."

I pull my friends aside. "I totally get how dangerous this is. If any of you don't feel comfortable coming with me, it's okay."

Lara shakes her head. "No way I'm chickening out twice."

"Els?" I ask.

"I—I'm not backing out," she says.

Jayden nods. "We got this."

We return to the counter and Elsie steps out front. "Can I have one of those maps? I'd like to memorize it."

The goblin reaches beneath the counter for a folded bit of paper, but it crumbles to dust in his hands. "Seems these are a bit . . . outdated." He turns and offers Elsie the map from the wall instead. "Have a look at this."

While Elsie studies, Lara and I pull out our Stun Sticks.

"Excuse me," says the goblin. "I'm afraid no weapons are allowed down below. For obvious reasons."

"But these are harmless," says Lara. "They don't actually hurt anyone."

"No exceptions," says the goblin.

I groan and place my Stun Stick on the counter. Lara follows suit, equally annoyed. I'm sure we were both counting on being able to use

flashlight mode. So I decide to take a different precaution, dropping to a knee to pretend like I'm tying my shoe, and slipping the Lockless Key into my sock.

"I think I've got it memorized," says Elsie. "As long as our candle stays lit, we should be okay."

I turn to face the goblin. "We're ready."

"Very well." The goblin grabs hold of a large lever behind the counter and pulls. The trapdoor flops open, releasing a stale, sour smell. My friends and I cover our noses.

"Never gets old," says the goblin, grinning. "The pungent aroma of utter despair."

The harsh sound of clanking chains and grinding gears echo below until a large wooden crate is lifted so it's level with the cave floor. A series of locks bolted onto the front begin to unfasten, completely on their own, until the door to the crate creaks open.

"In you go," shouts the goblin. "Also, I'll be collecting your electronics here on the counter. We don't want anything that could allow an inmate to connect with the outside world. Your devices will be returned to you in the unlikely event you come back with your body and/or sanity intact."

The goblin grins, but we don't. It's a good thing I stashed the Lockless Key when I did.

None of us are eager to be the first inside the crate. So I start walking. This thing isn't in the best shape. The wood is cracked and rotted in places, and there are enough scuffs and scratches on the outside of the door to make it clear there are some very unfriendly supernaturals down there.

I hesitate. Am I really about to do this? Doubts swirl inside me but one thought keeps them at bay. Finding Moreau's apprentice and getting the location of the Wonders is the only chance we've got to stop Dylan.

It's the only way to save my brother and Magnus and everyone else I care about.

So I step inside and then turn around to look at the others. I think they were waiting to see if I'd wimp out. But now that I'm inside, they follow.

The goblin closes the door behind us, and I hear the locks click back into place.

"No turning back now," Jayden whispers.

“We’ll be fine,” I say. “We know where we’re going and how to get there. As long as we can do it before the candle goes out, we should be okay.”

“Maybe,” says Lara. “But I don’t trust that goblin one bit. He’s a little *too* nonchalant about how awful this all is. I bet there’s something he’s not telling us.”

Elsie whimpers, and I hear her sniffle a few times.

I reach over and give my best friend’s hand a gentle squeeze. There’s just enough light in here through the cracks in the wood that I can see her smile gratefully.

Then the chains start moving again, the crate jerking so hard beneath our feet that we’re sent stumbling. I peek through a crack on the wall and watch as the crate descends below the floor.

“Down, down, down they goes . . . ,” sings the goblin. “Will they return? Nobody knows!”

The crate dims as we fall away from the light.

And then it goes dark. Completely black. I can’t even see my own hands in front of my face.

But I can hear my friends’ shallow breathing. The chains and creaking wood.

I try to think of some encouraging words but I’ve already said everything there is to say. We’ve just got to do this and get back.

It feels like we’ve been dropping forever. The smell only gets worse. And then the wails begin to reach us, and the screaming. Something growls so loudly that everything else falls quiet. And then another shout starts the noise back up again.

“W-we must be getting close to the b-bottom,” says Elsie in a trembling voice.

“I think so,” I say.

“Should we light the candle?” Jayden asks.

“Not till we land,” I say. “It’s our only protection down here. We’ve got to make it last.”

The others agree and so we keep waiting. But with each passing minute the sounds of misery outside pluck at my own fears. I think about Dylan’s pained expression whenever he spoke about his time in the Sightless Depths. What’s waiting for us out there?

With a *boom*, the crate hits the ground.

I guess we're about to find out.



ONE BY ONE, I HEAR THE LOCKS UNFASTEN. THE CREAKY wooden door swinging open.

“Hurry,” I whisper. “Light the candle!”

I hear Lara fumble, then a flame sparks to life, and the frightened faces of my friends appear in the candlelight. Lara steps to the edge of the crate to hold up the candle. We gather at the edge to look too, but the light only goes so far. Even inside the crate the surrounding dark feels heavy and suffocating, like it’s pressing in on us from all sides.

“Let’s get going so we don’t lose our nerve,” I say. “Els, which way?”

Elsie seems to wake from a daze. “S-sorry. It’s straight ahead until we run into a stone wall. Then we turn right.”

“I’ll lead,” Lara says. “If that’s okay? I’m the best fighter here . . . in case it, um, comes to that.”

“No arguments from me,” I say.

“We right behind you,” says Jayden.

Lara takes a deep breath to calm herself and steps out of the crate. We’re all careful to keep close. She starts at a fast walk and then picks up the pace to a light jog.

I look past her to see the flame flickering. “Be careful. If the candle goes out, we’re done for.”

Lara nods over her shoulder. Even slowed by the ice curse, she could run like this all day if she needed to. Heck, she could’ve been there and back again before the rest of us could make it halfway. But there’s no chance the candle would stay lit at that speed, and without Elsie’s genius memory to guide the way, Lara would be lost in no time.

It’s not long before we start to hear more than just the wails and shouting. Now there are footsteps too—and close. We’ve gotten the attention of the prisoners.

Skittering footfalls keep pace with our own, seeming to come from just outside the circle of candlelight. I try to peer in the direction of the sound, but the darkness is too thick. I glance from Elsie to Jayden and can tell from their tense expressions that they hear it too.

The goblin was honest about one thing at least. The things that dwell down here do shy away from the light. More than once, Lara slows to make sure we’re still together and we catch sight of someone—or *something*—scurrying out of the way.

My heart is beating so fast, I don’t know how much more of this I can take. Finally, we reach the stone wall Elsie told us about.

“Just a . . .” Elsie hunches over. “. . . few seconds . . . to catch . . . my breath, please.”

“Good . . . idea.” I’m panting too.

Lara looks unfazed by the trip so far, but she nods her approval.

Jayden turns and puts his back to the wall and his eyes go wide. “Y’all . . .”

I turn too, and feel my jaw drop open. Eyes. So many sets of eyes stare back, following us in the dark.

“Go away!” shouts Lara. “Our candle isn’t going out, so there’s no sense in waiting around.”

But Elsie shakes her head. “Maybe they’re just curious. If visitors are as rare as the guard said, it’s probably been forever since they’ve seen any light.”

“They’re literally the worst criminals ever,” says Lara. “I don’t think they’ve come to cook marshmallows and sing songs.”

I want to remind her that people used to think I was a criminal too. They said I deserved to be sent here—and I hadn’t even hurt anyone. But I also know some, if not most, of the folks in here really have done horrible things. And in the dark, it’s impossible to know who’s who. Or what being down here has done to them.

“Let’s just go,” I say instead.

We turn right like Elsie said, slower this time and much closer together now that we’re super aware of just how *not* alone we really are. Whispers echo in the dark.

“Be careful up ahead,” says Elsie. “There’s an underground lake coming up. We need to follow it around until we find the entrance to a tunnel.”

“Good call,” says Lara. “I hope we don’t have trouble getting back out.”

“If they follow us inside then we’ll just have to use the light to push them back to the entrance,” I say. “I’m really hoping that works because I’m feeling nauseated and questioning my life choices.”

“Are we at least close to where this apprentice is supposed to be?” asks Lara.

Elsie nods. “The location is inside the tunnel. Thankfully the map showed the different ways the tunnel branches off so we should be okay.”

“And how are we on the candle?” I ask.

Lara holds it up for us to see. "I didn't want to hurt team morale . . ."

I gape at her. It's nearly halfway gone already. And we haven't even arrived yet.

"I'm gonna throw up," says Elsie.

"Nobody freak out," I say. "It just means we've got to pick up the pace, okay?" I turn to Elsie. "Do you think you can keep up?"

Elsie nods. "If it means not being here one second longer than I have to be then I'll manage."

So we start off toward the underground lake, full-on running this time. The black depths of the water look especially ominous as bubbles float to the surface.

Something lunges from the lake into our path, causing everyone to scream, and we book it the rest of the way to the tunnel mouth.

Thankfully the flame hasn't gone out. Yet.

"No stopping," I say. "We don't have time."

The others agree and Elsie leads us through ever-shrinking tunnels that split off a dozen different times. We call out for the apprentice again and again but there's no response.

We keep going. This place is practically an underground maze, but Elsie really does have the whole thing memorized inside that genius brain of hers.

We keep shouting hellos until we reach the end of our tunnel. Except there's nothing here. Just unnaturally smooth cave walls.

Lara growls in frustration. "Look!"

Etched into one wall is an engraving of the Goblin King blowing out a candle. The words underneath read *Lights Out!*

"There was nobody here to find!" Lara says. "I knew we shouldn't have trusted that goblin."

A dizzying fear threatens to undo me. But I manage to keep my voice calm enough to say, "W-we've got to get out of here."

"There's no time." Lara holds up the candle. It's nearly three-quarters gone now. "We won't make it."

"Bring the light over here." Elsie waves us toward one of the smooth cave walls. "I was thinking these couldn't be natural, and I was right. Look at these grooves in the stone. It almost looks like a ladder, don't you think?"

It does. But where could it lead? We're surrounded by stone.

Lara lifts the candle above her head. Out of the gloom, I'm just able to make out the outline of something etched into the ceiling. It almost looks like—

“Ah!” I jump back. “That’s a face!”

Elsie yelps and ducks behind me and Jayden.

Lara holds her ground, tentatively lifting the candle even higher. “Is it alive?”

The stony eyes blink and squint in the candlelight.

“Oh, it’s alive,” says Lara.

“Who are you?” I ask.

The stone face blinks a few more times before its eyes settle on me. A sneer forms on its lips. “Why are *you* here? Go away before something out there finds me!”

I step forward. That voice—I’ve heard it before. “*You’re* Moreau’s apprentice!”

“I’m no one,” the stone face hisses. “Down here titles mean nothing. Now begone with you!”

“Not until we get an answer,” I say. “Tell us where the Night Brothers hid the Wonders, and we’ll leave. Promise.”

“Are you mad? Why on earth do you want those?” The stone face keeps glancing toward the entrance of the tunnel.

“Please,” I say. “We need to get the Wonders in order to save—”

“Those Despicable Wonders do not save!” bellows the face. “Those items are cursed! All of them.”

“Please,” I say. “Hear us out.”

“No,” booms the face. “You hear *me*, girl. To use the Time Gem is to steal years from your own life . . . and the Crown can hold limitless magic, but it will come at the cost of your sanity. Do you understand? The Night Brothers used only the Wonders whose curses they were able to counteract. Whatever Wonders remained in their workshop were too dangerous. They can’t be used without doing grave harm to yourself.”

I think about what Dylan told me in the Dream Meet. That wearing the Crown came with a cost. No wonder that Dream Meet was so chaotic—the Crown is affecting his mind.

Lara thrusts the candle even closer to the stone face, and he shrinks back. “We still need to know where they are.”

“Fine!” he answers. “Under one condition. You give me the Lockless Key hidden in your sock.”

“How did you—”

“Doesn’t matter how I know,” answers the face. “Your candle is running out. Either we all leave here together, or you’ve come for nothing.”

“I don’t know about this,” says Jayden.

“Me either,” says Elsie.

Lara stays quiet, her brow furrowed. “Give it to him. The Bureau caught him once, we can do it again.”

All eyes shift to me. I reach down and pull the Lockless Key from my sock. “I know we were scared to use this before, but it’s only us in this tunnel. We can create a door and be gone before anything out there realizes what happened.”

The stone splits with a loud crack. A man begins to emerge, shaking off bits of rock to reveal a dingy prison jumper underneath. The stone covering the man’s face crumbles, and he peels the rest away.

“Give me the Key,” the man says. “I don’t trust you not to try something.”

“How do we know you’ll give us the right location?” I ask. “You could say anything.”

He places a hand over his heart, his fingers glowing faintly. “A vow to you on my magic: should you hand me the Key, I will immediately reveal the location of Moreau’s secret workshop.”

“What does a vow on your magic mean exactly?” I ask.

“It’s no small thing, girl,” he replies. “I’d forfeit my magic if I don’t hold up my end of the bargain.”

I hesitate but hand him the Lockless Key.

The man closes his eyes and presses the Key to his lips. “Freedom at last.”

Lara steps forward. “Location, please?”

“I’ve got coordinates,” the man says, and he rattles off a series of numbers.

“Can you remember those?” I ask Elsie.

She nods. “Got it.”

“Guys, the candle is almost out,” urges Lara. “We need to go! Now!”

The man steps forward. “Seen Moreau use one of these things before. Just gotta say where you want to go, am I right? Take me back to my

apartment in Brooklyn.” He jabs the Key into the wall but it clanks against the stone.

He whirls on us. “You tricked me—this is a fake! Thought you’d come down here and make a fool of me, huh?”

“No,” I say quickly. “You have to be specific. It may not be your apartment anymore—”

But he’s not listening. He shivers and snatches the candle from Lara, eyes frantic. He’s muttering to himself. “You must’ve come down in the crate. I can make it there if I hurry. . . . The candle will protect me.”

Before any of us can think to stop him, he dashes out of the tunnel.

Leaving us in the dark.

“Come on!” I shout. “We’ve got to get our stuff back!”

The four of us give chase, doing our best to keep sight of the candle as the apprentice ducks into the tunnels ahead of us. Even Lara has trouble keeping up.

It’s all we can to keep close. And it’s so incredibly dark.

Finally we burst out of the tunnel maze to find the magician standing before a sea of other prisoners. They hiss and shrink away from the fading candlelight. The apprentice glances over his shoulder to us, and I watch him come to the realization that there’s too many prisoners between him and the crate. He’ll never make it.

I see the moment he makes a decision. A horrible one.

He’s going to try the Lockless Key again.

My heart skips. If he succeeds this time and opens a door here, there’s no telling how many will escape behind him. The entire Sightless Depths could exit through that door.

He jabs the Key into the stone floor, shouting, “Take me home!”

But again, nothing happens. Because this is his home now. And the candle flickers out.

“*What the dark touches,*” shouts one of the prisoners, “*the dark keeps.*”

I barely hold back a scream, and then a bright plume of fire shoots up. I turn to see Elsie breathing flames. In the orange glow, I dash forward to pick up the Key from the ground. There’s just enough light to see the apprentice being dragged away by the other prisoners. But I can’t help him.

No one can. We’re out of time.

With Elsie's fiery blaze leading the way, we do our best to run while we can, the endless sea of bodies parting to flee my best friend's fire. A long, scaled hand reaches for me, but I narrowly duck it. The prisoners are getting bolder.

"We're back at the underground lake," Lara announces.

Elsie's fire finally gives out. "I—I'm out of breath."

The darkness swallows us whole, filling my vision so completely it feels like I'm floating in nothingness.

We're utterly lost. Nowhere to go.

I reach for my friends. "I'm so sorry."

But Elsie pushes me away. "There's more I can do!"

"Els?" I whisper. She can't mean what I think she means.

I hear my best friend growl in my ear, but the sound begins to fade as I realize she's running away from us.

Lara's voice stutters. "W-what's going on?"

It happens so fast. Out of the darkness suddenly comes so much light. A river of fire brightens an underground cavern so vast it seems endless. For a few seconds it almost looks like daylight.

Elsie has gone full dragon.

"She's given us a chance," says Lara. "We've got to go!"

But I can't. My feet won't move. How can we leave Elsie down here? What happens when she's a girl again and has to face this awful place alone in the dark? Dylan's haunted face flashes in my mind. "No! We've got to go back for her!"

Lara doesn't argue. Instead she scoops me up and tosses me over her shoulder. Then she starts running, her arm like a steel band over my middle.

I pound on Lara to let me down, let me go back, but she doesn't listen. Jayden runs behind her, losing ground with every step.

I look up to see Elsie clearing a path for us in flame. Lara says to Jayden, "I'll get Amari to the crate then come back for you."

Jayden nods, and the world blurs as Lara dashes full speed to the crate. I'm set down and she's gone again.

I immediately crawl back to the door to see Elsie still in dragon form lighting the path for Lara's return trip. But her blaze reveals other things too. My best friend has made too big a scene; she's woken things even larger than she is. And they begin to stir in the shadows.

Something slams into Elsie and the fires go out, casting everything into darkness once more.

But Lara's not back yet. Jayden either.

I scream my friends' names. But no one answers.

How can they find the crate in the dark?

Am I about to lose them all? I can't. I've got to do something—anything.

So I reach into my pocket and grab my Victor's Ring and slip it on. That usual jolt of magic is gone, used up by the Dream Meet I created with Dylan.

But if there's any magic left in this thing at all then I have I try. I throw open my arms and scream, "Solis!"

Last summer this spell lit me up like the sun.

Now it's barely a flicker, the fully drained ring turning cool on my finger. But only a few seconds later Lara arrives, dropping Jayden hard on his butt. She slams the door shut with one hand and yanks on the chain with the other. Something tries to pry the door open but thankfully Lara is too strong.

We begin to rise. We're safe—because of Elsie.

Flames brighten the Depths and my heart leaps with joy. "Hurry!" I shout. "You can still make it—the door is open!"

But the flames also show me that shadows are closing in around Elsie. And when they reach her, my best friend's fire goes out.

And stays out.



I DON'T THINK. I JUST REACT. I SLIP PAST LARA AND JUMP out of the cage. I've got to get to Elsie.

I hit the ground with a thud. It's so dark I can't see anything.

"Ow!" I cry, something sharp biting into my arm. It latches onto my leg. "Get off!"

I jump at the sound of something crashing down next to me, taking out whatever was trying to eat me for lunch. It's too dark to see what it was, but the groan tells me it's Jayden. He must've jumped down after me.

"What were you thinking?" I ask.

Jayden's voice still sounds pained. "I was thinkin' we stick together."

"Amari?" calls Lara. "Where are you?"

Lara jumped too?

"Over here!" I shout.

I reach for Jayden and his face suddenly comes into view, a ghostly green glow emerging just over his head.

Peek-a-Boo yawns and looks around, confused. "Why's it so dark?"

"Long story," I say. "We're in the Sightless Dep—"

Something furry grabs me again, twisting my arm.

I hear Jayden cry out.

That's when Peek-a-Boo shimmers extra bright. His youthful face is a menacing red, as angry as I've ever seen it. "NO ONE MESSES WITH MY FRIENDS. AND NO ONE SCARES MY HAUNTEE BUT ME. I CALL UPON ALL THOSE WHO HAVE LOST THEIR LIVES IN THIS PLACE TO RISE AND SUPPORT A GHOST IN NEED! I DEMAND A HAUNTED HAVOC!"

Eerie shimmers begin to pop into view all around us. Soon the place is filled with them, bathing the cavern in angry red light. These ghosts have got scores to settle.

While the sea of prisoners turn their focus to this ghostly army, Lara dashes over. "You guys okay?"

"Can you get to Elsie?" I ask.

"I can try." She speeds off in a blur.

"We should get back in the cage," I say, glancing up. It's about seven or eight feet off the ground.

Jayden nods, hoisting me onto his shoulders so I'm able to grab on to the edge to pull myself up. He takes a running start and gets enough air to reach the cage too. I grab his arm and pull him inside.

And now we wait. "Please be okay, Els. Please."

The ghosts seem to be getting the better of the prisoners. Which makes sense—like the Chamberlains love to remind us, the dead can't die a second time.

The moment I spot Lara blazing a trail back toward the cage, I grab the door and swing it open.

"Out of the way!" she yells.

I'm only just able to get clear when she jumps in with Elsie in her arms.

Jayden gives the rope a tug, and with a jerk the cage starts to rise. Lara lays Elsie down on the floor. My best friend's a girl again, but her whole body is covered in black scales save for her face and neck.

"She's not moving," I whisper.

"Just unconscious," says Lara. "Her pulse is strong."

I blow out a relieved sigh. "Thanks for not leaving."

Lara wipes the sweat from her face and smiles. "I honestly don't remember making the decision. You jumped, and next thing I knew I was jumping after you."

I grin back. "Good enough for me."

The crate comes to a stop, and we wait for the goblin to come and unlock the doors. When that doesn't happen, I get up and bang on the walls of the crate.

"Open up!" I shout.

"Afraid I can't do that," calls the goblin. "You all caused too much of a ruckus down there. And, honestly, you weren't supposed to make it back at all."

"I knew it," Lara hisses.

"The Goblin King himself is on his way to administer punishment for your actions." The goblin sighs. "Sadly I think you'll be headed back down."

I don't think so. I reach into my pocket for the Lockless Key. Lara and Jayden both look doubtful, and I don't blame them. We all saw the Key fail Moreau's apprentice.

But I think that had more to do with him than the Key.

I jab the Key into the side of the crate. "Take me someplace safe where Elsie can recover."

To my relief, a door forms. When I pull it open, there's a beach on the other side. I hesitate, but only for a moment. Anywhere's better than here.

"Tell the Goblin King hello from us," Lara calls as she scoops Elsie into her arms and runs through.

Jayden and I follow, slamming the door shut behind us.

Me and my friends rest on the beach. The sun is high overhead, and a warm breeze blows over us as waves crash against the shore. After the chaos of the Sightless Depths, we needed this.

Sure, I feel the urge to press on. We're so close to finding the Wonders. But even if I wanted to rush off to Moreau's workshop, the

coordinates are in Elsie's head, and she's still unconscious. Like it or not, until my best friend wakes up, we're stuck.

It's Lara who tends to Elsie, laying her gently on the sand. Our dragon girl is still covered in scales from the neck down, many of them cracked or chipped. Even with her eyes shut, the pain is visible in her face.

And honestly, we're *all* pretty beat-up. Bumps, bruises—and our clothes definitely have seen better days.

"We should look around." Jayden points to the forest at our back. "Need to figure out where we are."

I'm about to suggest we stay with Els, but Lara nods and says, "Go on. I'll look after her while you're gone."

I get to my feet and follow Jayden. I throw a look over my shoulder. Lara carefully goes over each scale with a travel-sized bottle of Hurried Healing gel—it's the same care Elsie showed Lara after that frost curse. Despite their on-again, off-again friendship, there's a genuine bond between them that's never totally gone away.

"You good?" Jayden asks, stopping me before we step into the brush.

"I will be if Elsie's okay," I answer. "How about you? And Peek-a-Boo?"

Jayden laughs. "I'm a lil shaken up, not gonna lie. But I'll be a'ight. As for Peek? Raising an undead army must've tired him out again. He really putting the rest in 'rest in peace.'"

That makes me smile. I raise an eyebrow. "Did you really bring me over here to explore with you or did you just wanna talk?"

The boy scratches his neck. "Ain't like the way you was looking, if I'm being real. You do this thing where you worry 'bout everyone else, and I just thought somebody ought to check on you."

"That's sweet," I say. "But I'm not more important than the mission."

Jayden shrugs. "You super important to me. You know my story, people see me and they see some thug kid from the wrong side of town. And that's how I saw me too. But you got me out here saving the world. Never saw myself as no hero. But now think I might be capable of anything. You showed me that."

I meet his eyes. And this time Jayden doesn't look nervous or look away. He smiles.

A low growl echoes through the trees and Jayden steps in front of me. I reach for my Stun Stick, remembering too late that it's still with the

goblin on duty back at the Sightless Depths.

“Go back with Lara and El Smooth,” says Jayden. “I got this.”

“But—”

“Animals kinda my thing, remember?” He grins. “Trust me.”

I nod. Jayden’s supernatural ability lets him communicate with animals, but something tells me whatever that was isn’t looking for good conversation.

Still, I do trust him. He’s earned that from me. So I nod and jog back to Lara and Elsie.

“Back already?” Lara asks.

“Jayden may or may not be risking his life against a horrible beast right now,” I say.

Lara starts to get to her feet but I stop her. “He said to let him handle it,” I say.

Lara looks reluctant but retakes her seat.

I bite down on my lip, feeling my nerves fray. Jayden’s kind words are drowned out by the worry I feel for him. And the realization that my friends are constantly in danger because of choices I’ve made. What if I was wrong to bring them on such a dangerous mission? How long before our luck runs out? Or before we face something that not all of us make it back from?

After a few minutes I ask Lara, “Do you regret coming with me?”

Lara looks confused, so I follow up. “Is saving the world worth possibly losing a friend?”

“You can’t think like that,” says Lara. “We knew what we signed up for, and you gave us plenty of chances to back out.”

“Sure,” I say. “But none of us could’ve guessed we’d end up in the Sightless Depths.”

“We do whatever we have to do,” says Lara. “The mission comes first. We’re Junior Agents.”

“But Elsie isn’t.” I shake my head. “And neither is Jayden. I got so angry at Quinton for wanting to leave me behind, for putting my safety before what’s best for the world. But I never worry about my brother the way he worries for me. In the back of my head, I’ve never let myself fully believe he won’t be okay. Not when he was missing, not even when he was cursed. Because he’s my big brother—he’s *the* Quinton Peters, you know?”

“I think so.” Lara nods.

“But after seeing you nearly frozen during our rescue and then thinking I’d led all of you to the Sightless Depths just to die . . .” I glance down at Elsie. “My best friend being forced to sacrifice herself to save us . . .” I let my eyes drift toward the trees where I left Jayden and then shut them tight. “I’ve never felt *this* scared. And I think I get it now—Quinton didn’t want to have to choose between saving me or saving the world. I thought that was so weak, because of course you’d choose to save the world. Only I conveniently ignored the fact that I didn’t—I handed Dylan the Crown because I couldn’t stand to lose *Elsie*. And now the world has to pay for that choice.”

Lara lowers her eyes. “I honestly don’t know what I’d have done in that situation.”

“Then you’re braver than me,” I say. “Because I’d make the same decision every time.”

Footsteps sound in the trees, and we turn to find Jayden coming out of the woods.

He grins. “Guess where we are? The Wandering Isles.”

The Wandering Isles are one of the most enchanted places on Earth. It’s where Director Horus from the Department of Good Fortunes and Bad Omens comes on his sabbaticals. And since these islands really do wander, it also means we could be in any sea or ocean right now.

“Why did the Lockless Key choose to bring us here?” I only asked that it take us someplace safe.

Jayden shrugs. “Beats me.”

That’s when I notice the colorful bird perched on Jayden’s shoulder. When he sees me staring, the boy grins wide. “This lil birdie told me there’s a temple not too far. Someplace that can help El Smooth.”

“Whose temple?” I ask. “And will there be more growling monsters waiting for us?”

Jayden laughs. “Not unless you count my friend here.” He whispers to the bird and suddenly tufts of fur break out across the tiny creature, its little beak retreating into sharp fangs.

“A beast bird,” says Lara. “That’s what had you so spooked?”

I can’t help but laugh at myself. “To be fair, it sounds more dangerous than it looks.”

“Well, if this temple can help Elsie, it’s worth a trip.” Lara says, scooping her up. “And it might be nice to get indoors before it gets late.”

I glance up at the darkening sky and nod. "Let's check it out."

Even if Jayden hadn't learned where we are, it's clear that these woods are enchanted. A gentle melody plays, seemingly carried on the wind. Trees lean in close to have a look at us, and a curious vine boops the end of my nose. Spark Blooms flicker to life and fade just as fast, wilting into puffs of smoke.

At some point it becomes obvious that something is following us. Maybe even more than one something. There seems to be a shadow that's always just out of sight.

We each seem to realize it at the same time.

"Who's there?" Jayden calls, but nothing answers.

"Let's hurry and get where we're going," I say.

We start to run. It's not till we reach a clearing that a beast rears its terrifying heads—three to be exact. A snarling lion and a fierce goat with long, very pointy horns. And a hissing snake as its tail.

"Chimeras are crazy rare." Jayden steps forward, extending a hand. It takes everything in me not to pull him back. The lion's jaw is wide enough to bite him in half.

So that's what's been trailing us.

"It's a'ight," says Jayden. "We ain't mean to trample through your nest. Just lost is all, we ain't from round here."

The chimera steps closer, the hissing-snake tail poised to strike.

"Jayden . . .," I whisper.

But the chimera's lion head nuzzles Jayden's hand, and little baby chimeras come stumbling out of the trees.

It's dark by the time we reach a paved walkway that leads to a stone temple shrouded in white mist.

Lara frowns. "How much do we trust the bird again?"

Jayden passes along the question, and the colorful bird leaps into the air, flying into the mist and back out again. It lands back on Jayden's shoulder and cocks its head as if to say "See?"

"Guess that settles it, then." I start up the walkway.

When I reach the mist I hesitate but step through anyway. Polished stone floors stretch out before us, and great big columns tower up and out of sight. More mist inside prevents us from seeing too far ahead.

A half man, half spider descends from out of the gloom on a single strand of shimmering white web.

“My name is Anansi the Spider.” He smiles. “I’ve been expecting you, Amari Peters.”

I nearly leap out of my skin. Maybe the beast bird was a false alarm, but I’ve got a thing about spiders. They give me the creeps.

But Anansi doesn’t seem offended. He merely inclines his head.

He’s surprisingly handsome for a spider, with dark brown skin, a kind smile, and wide hazel eyes. At least until you reach his torso, where eight hairy spider legs branch off from an equally hairy thorax and abdomen. Mr. Ames—my and Elsie’s biology teacher back at Whitman Prep—would be so proud I remember my bug anatomy.

This spider guy doesn’t appear to be a threat. After all, he’s got on a blue vest and matching kufi hat that look awfully familiar.

“You wouldn’t happen to know Director Horus, would you?” I ask.

Anansi’s smile widens. “Horus has been known to visit this temple from time to time. Those burdened with the weight of foresight often find solace in one another’s company. You might say we three are kindred spirits.”

“*Three?*” Lara asks.

“Ah, forgive my manners.” Anansi laughs. “We so rarely get visitors.” He looks to the wall of thick mist and calls, “Come out, darling, we’ve got company.”

A few seconds later, a beautiful olive-skinned lady with flowing black hair emerges. She’s half spider too.

“Meet Arachne,” says Anansi, taking her hand. “We are the Eternal Spiders. Two misunderstood individuals bound by fate and purpose who have forged a deep love and everlasting companionship.”

“Arachne?” says Lara. “I didn’t think arachnes were still around.”

The lady smiles. “I could say the same for weredragons. Though it seems your friend can’t quite decide whether to be human or dragon at the moment.”

“Jayden’s bird friend said you could help her,” says Lara. “Is that true?”

“Beyond our home lies a rejuvenating spring,” says Arachne, pointing into the mist. “I cannot make guarantees, but the healing waters have been known to work wonders. Jayden, Lara, come along with me, so Amari and Anansi can speak in private.”

“We stick together,” Lara objects.

Jayden looks uneasy. “Y’all seem cool and all, but we don’t really know y’all like that.” He has a point, but these spiders feel trustworthy. Especially if they know Director Horus.

“Go help Els,” I say. “I’ll be fine.”

Lara looks down at Elsie in her arms and that seems to make the decision for her. “Just yell if you need us, okay?”

I nod. “Will do.”

“You sure about this?” asks Jayden.

“Sure as I’m gonna be,” I say. “You’re the one who’s always calling me a superstar. It’s time I shine.”

He rolls his eyes. “How long you been saving that one for?”

“Too long,” I say. “Now get going. Elsie needs help.”

The lady spider disappears into the mist and my friends follow.

I peer up at Anansi, wondering how much of a coincidence this really is. “Are you two the reason the Lockless Key brought us here?”

Anansi laughs. “Perhaps. In truth, we have vital information to offer about your struggle against Dylan Van Helsing.” He points in the opposite direction of my friends. “But be warned, it shall come at great cost to you.”

“Just how vital are we talking?” I ask.

“The difference between ultimate failure and success.”

“That important, huh?”

Anansi waits quietly.

“Fine,” I say. “Show me.”

The moment I step through the mist, I’m nearly blinded by white light. I’ve got to shield my eyes and blink a few times to make out what I’m seeing. It’s incredible.

Glowing white webs extend forever in every direction. As far, and as high, and even as low as I can see.

“What is this place?” I ask.

“These are the life threads of every person on the planet,” says Arachne, behind me. “We are their guardians.”

I whirl, unaware she’d returned. “My friends?”

“Resting comfortably,” says Arachne, stepping past me to stand beside Anansi. “Elsie will make a full recovery.”

Relief pours through me. “Thank you.” With that weight off my shoulders, I try to refocus. “When you say life threads . . .”

“She means the life stories of every being on the planet,” says Anansi.

I step forward. “Are you saying our stories are already written?”

“Not in the slightest,” says Arachne. “Every choice creates new opportunities that branch off and join other life stories, creating the intricately intertwined web of possibilities you see before you.”

“Is this what you wanted me to see?” I ask. “That we’re all interconnected?”

“Yes and no.” Anansi points to a huge knot of webbing that doesn’t shimmer at all—it’s so dark amid the light that I didn’t notice it earlier. “There is a single threat that seems to hang over countless life threads. We are not unused to horrible events—wars, famine, plagues have all wrought devastation in the past. But this will top them all, touching every corner of our world. We spiders are powerless to confront this fate, as we are honor-bound not to interfere directly. But your life thread is already barreling toward the pivotal moment that will decide whether this terrible fate comes to pass.”

I don’t have to guess. “You’re talking about Dylan using anti-magick, aren’t you?”

Neither answers.

“Please, Amari,” says Arachne. “Step onto your life thread and see what awaits.” She points to a spot at the edge of the paved stone. It’s one of the only places where no webbing attaches.

I swallow and then move to the spot.

“I was once called a god of stories,” says Anansi, stepping beside me. With a wave of his hands the glowing webs vanish, and the chamber darkens.

“Allow me to weave *your* story.” The spider steps forward, creating a shimmering string of web, like a glowing tightrope across the expanse.

“Come,” says Anansi. “Step into your own life.”

I place a nervous foot onto the webbing. Then, once I’m sure it’ll hold my weight, step out completely.

Arachne’s voice echoes in my ears. “I once wove tapestries whose quality none could match. I shall depict for you the story Anansi has written.”

Arachne moves so fast I only catch flashes of her here and there, but slowly the darkness around me begins to fill in with images. Suddenly I’m no longer my present self. Images of my childhood surround me, whizzing past in a blur.

Until I find myself with Dylan Van Helsing at the Bureau last summer. He's telling me I'm a magician and what that means.

It's followed by Dylan's betrayal, with us doing battle last summer and me winning. Then facing him again this summer and losing the Crown.

The images begin to get fuzzy as they shift to events that haven't happened yet. I see myself lifting a knife with a shiny gold handle and a solid black blade. It's one of the Wonders—that nameless knife. In the next flash I'm crouched before the Lens of Increase.

Joy swells in my chest, because this has to mean we win, right? Getting the Lens of Increase means Dylan can't use it to control anti-magick.

But another scene emerges. And Dylan looks anything but defeated. In fact, we're face-to-face. Neither of us looks happy.

Then it's over, and I'm back in the cavern with Anansi and Arachne.

They both dangle from thin webs.

I turn to face them. "What happens next?"

"It's hard to know because your life thread ends," Anansi answers.

"It . . . ends? But why—" The answer hits me before I finish the question.

"Threads end the moment someone passes from this realm to the next," says Arachne.

"You mean if a person dies," I say. "That's what you're trying to say, isn't it?"

Neither Anansi nor Arachne answers my question.

I feel a tear slip down my cheek. "What was the point of coming all this way if I'm just going to die anyway? If I'm going to fail *again*?"

"No one said you will fail," says Anansi. "At this point it's impossible to know."

"But we do know what will happen if you don't see this future through," says Arachne. "Every *other* possible future leads to Dylan wiping out countless life threads."

I shake my head in disbelief. "So you're saying in that future I could die, but it's the only future where everyone else is saved?"

Anansi and Arachne look at one another. Arachne swings in close, her voice softening to a whisper. "We realize this news is difficult to hear. But it's gravely important that you do hear it and make the right choice."

The right choice? I stomp back through the mist, shaking. What they said can't be true. There has to be another way. I'll find it and show them.

Because I want to live. There are so many things I want to do in my life.

I won't accept their words. I can't.

We're going to beat Dylan to the Wonders. I'm going to save the supernatural world.

I'm going to live. And then I'm coming back to tell those spiders how wrong they were.



“**A**MARI!”

I’m standing just outside the temple, and two arms circle me from behind, squeezing tight. I turn to find my best friend in a shimmering white dress. It almost looks like—

“Are you wearing spiderwebs?” I ask.

“Spider *silk*,” she corrects, stepping back to do a twirl. “Isn’t it gorgeous? I’m not super big into fashion, but wow. Right?”

Seeing my best friend so happy makes it impossible not to smile too. Even when my mind is still spinning from the spiders’ message.

“Els,” I say, “you look great.”

“Then why is your aura so blue?” asks Elsie. “I thought it was because you were worried about me, but I’m clearly okay. So what’s wrong?”

Lara and Jayden step from the mist, looking just as rejuvenated.

“You gotta try them healing waters,” says Jayden. “It’s like going swimming in an energy drink.”

“We’re all fixed up,” says Lara. “It’s your turn now. On the way maybe you can tell us what the spiders said.”

I shake my head. “No time. Now that Els is awake, we need to get the Wonders.” I turn back to Elsie. “Still remember the coordinates?”

Elsie nods. “But I’ll need a computer to look them up. Amari, I’m worried about you—”

“I’m fine.” I pull the Key from my pocket to jab it into a thick tree, but Lara catches my arm.

Looking me right in the eyes she says, “We aren’t going anywhere until you tell us what the spiders said.”

I blow out an annoyed breath. “They basically just said it’s up to me to stop Dylan. Like literally *me*. It’s just a lot of pressure, I guess.” It’s not a total lie.

Lara steps forward to pull me into a hug. Elsie and Jayden join too.

“Like I told you on the beach,” says Lara. “We’ve got your back, okay?”

I have to blink back tears. “Thanks, guys. But we really do have to get going.”

“Right,” says Lara, breaking the embrace. “Mission first?”

I nod. “Mission first.”

I’m half expecting a squadron of agents to be waiting for us when we step into Lara’s bedroom. After all, Director Van Helsing knows we were here once already, so it only makes sense to have someone stationed in case we come back.

The room is empty, but it’s immediately clear that Dylan’s storm has gotten much worse. Every one of Lara’s windows has shattered, and violent

wind gusts have thrown the room into chaos, blowing in leaves and trash from outside.

Thankfully Lara's computer was spared. So as jarring as this mess is to come back to, we don't waste any time before doing what we came here for. Elsie plops down in the chair, ready to enter the coordinates into Google Earth. But the moment we log in to Lara's computer, red alerts fill up the screen.

RED ALERT

All Junior personnel are to evacuate the Atlanta Bureau at once.

This not a drill.

RED ALERT

All non-agent personnel are to evacuate the Atlanta Bureau at once.

This not a drill.

RED ALERT

All Senior Agents are to report to the Atlanta Bureau at once.

This is not a drill.

RED ALERT

Attack on the Atlanta Bureau imminent!

This is not a drill.

"No, no, no!" says Lara. "The only time the Bureau goes agents-only is to make a last stand."

Elsie covers her mouth. "Are we too late, then? Has Dylan found the Wonders?"

"P-pull up Eurg," I stammer. "See what's happening."

Hands shaking, Elsie opens the othernet and goes to Eurg. Number one on the trending page is #AtlantaMegaStorm.

"Why didn't the supernaturals leave when Chief Crowe announced the evacuation?" Lara asks.

"This their home," says Jayden. "That and a lotta folks ain't got anywhere to go."

Elsie clicks on the #AtlantaMegaStorm hashtag. Supernaturals around the city post about just how awful the storm has gotten. Videos of dark clouds churning above the city, so low they touch the downtown skyscrapers . . . cars being blown down streets . . . flooding that fills the bottom floor of an apartment building.

“As bad as the storm is,” I say, “there’s still nothing here about anti-magick.”

“Except the alert said ‘attack imminent,’” says Lara. “Why else would they evacuate?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “But let’s get those Wonders and then we can head to the Bureau and find out for ourselves.”

“On it.” Elsie types the coordinates into Google Earth and the screen zooms in on a small clearing in the middle of nowhere. There’s an old well that looks abandoned, and not much else.

Jayden points to the screen. “That hideout definitely living up to the name. I don’t see nothing but that busted well.”

“Maybe there’s more to it than meets the eye?” Elsie says.

“Won’t know till we check it out,” I say.

We each grab a new Stun Stick from Lara’s closet. I can’t get the coordinates to work with the Lockless Key, so we use one of Lara’s transporters instead. On the bright side, this allows us to arrive a safe enough distance away from the well that we can scope out the area first. None of us knows quite what to expect.

After taking in our surroundings—just trees really—we approach the well cautiously. There’s a small sign facing the wrong way that reads *Howling Hole*.

“Man, even the sign don’t wanna be here,” says Jayden.

“Be on the lookout for anything suspicious,” Lara says. “For all we know this place is booby-trapped.”

When we reach the well without being cursed or hexed, I shake off my nerves and try to peer inside. But it’s caved in.

“Now what?” asks Elsie.

“There’s got to be some trick to this,” I say. “Maybe we can try moving the stones to see if anything’s underneath.”

“I got this.” Using her supernatural strength, Lara pulls up one of the larger stones. But before we can get a peek, there’s a rumble beneath our

feet and a surge of air blasts through the stones, howling something that sounds a lot like “Be Born to the Magic, or Food for Maggots.”

I flinch. This must be the right place. “Did you guys hear that?”

Elsie uncovers her ears. “All I heard was screaming.”

“Same,” Jayden follows. “Like somebody stepped on a cat or something.”

“Did you hear something different?” Lara asks.

I tell them.

“Well, born magician.” Lara nods to me. “Sounds like you’re up, then.”

“Okay,” I say. “But I’m not as strong as you are.”

“All in the legs,” says Jayden, demonstrating.

Despite everything, I can’t help a laugh. The boy looks ridiculous picking up air. It calms me enough to place my hands under a stone.

The instant my fingers make contact, the stones begin to move on their own, breaking apart and re-forming to create stairs that lead down into the well.

Jayden groans. “Ain’t we been underground enough for one day?”

Elsie rubs her arms. “Agreed.”

“It’s a well,” says Lara. “You had to expect we’d be heading down there.”

“A girl can hope,” says Elsie.

“Well, I’m going,” I say. “You guys can stay up here and keep an eye out.”

Lara steps beside me, drawing her Stun Stick. “I promised you’d always have backup.”

Together, she and I tiptoe down the circular stairs. The air is stale, and torches spring to life as we go, illuminating the chamber below.

We’re about halfway down when I hear a scraping sound. *What is that?* From the corner of my eye, I notice a section of the wall sliding away. I yelp as a dart whizzes toward my head.

But it sails over me. To where Lara is coming down the stairs.

“Lara—” is all I get out before hearing the dart clink harmlessly against the stone wall.

“Well, that was close,” says Lara. “If I didn’t have supernatural reflexes, I’d be toast right now.”

“Stick closer to me,” I say. “This place really doesn’t like anyone who wasn’t born with magic.”

We continue down, but no more darts appear.

A brass statue of Vladimir stands at the bottom of the stairs, looking as menacing as ever. I duck past it, but the moment Lara gets near, the thing lifts a hand to blow silvery powder into her face.

“Lara!” I shout, turning.

She doubles over, coughing.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

Lara wipes her face clean. “It got in my eyes.”

“Hold still,” I say. “I’ll help you.”

She stiffens. And then looks at me in confusion. “I’m not supposed to be here. I need to leave.” She turns back up the stairs, but I grab hold of her sleeve.

“Hey!” I say. “What’s gotten into you?”

“You don’t understand,” she says, tugging her arm free. “I have to go! I can’t be here!”

This doesn’t sound like my friend. Lara’s one of the bravest people I know. So I give her a hard shake. And then another.

Lara blinks a few times and seems to come to her senses. “Amari? What just happened?”

“I think we found the hex we were worried about. Another way to deter potential thieves. Except it didn’t affect me.” It’s further proof that being born a magician is the key to getting through this place.

“My head is throbbing,” she says with a wince.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “We’ll get out of here as soon as we can. For now, stay behind me, and don’t touch anything.”

“Will do.”

I turn around to face this new room. The walls are covered in various charts and diagrams. Stacks of books gather dust on long worktables. There’s even a small forge tucked away in the corner.

A few half-finished devices are discarded on the floor, their inner machinery still visible. Were the Night Brothers trying to create their own Wonders? Doesn’t seem like it went all that well.

“Over there.” Lara points.

I follow her to a worktable set apart from the others. On it sit three Wonders. The nameless knife, a horn of some sort . . .

And the Lens of Increase. The Wonder we most needed to find.

A replica of the mural is posted on the wall behind them. Except this version is covered in black ink, words written by the Night Brothers. At the very top it says:

THE DESPICABLE WONDERS

These enchantments contain unmatched power. But in keeping with the teachings of foul magick, the first magician, in his infinite wisdom, placed wicked curses upon each.

For some, we have found remedies, allowing us to add their power to our arsenal.

Those whose curses cannot be remedied must remain untouched lest we give in to temptation and usher forth our own demise.

It sounds exactly like what Moreau's apprentice told us. That using these Wonders has terrible consequences. But it also explains how the Night Brothers were able to use some of them. They found workarounds and labeled them on the chart.

CROWN OF EXCESS

*There is only so much magic a man can possess
for even the unnatural has limits.*

Our Master crafted an item capable of storing limitless power.
CURSE: *While the Crown's capacity is limitless, the human body
is not.*

The mind will be the first to crack.

REMEDY: *By taking on apprentices, one may disperse the magic
to others and thus lessen the strain on the mind.*

That must be the real reason the League of Magicians was created. Not to further magiciankind, but to allow Vladimir to use the Crown without going mad. But Dylan is doing the opposite now; he's taking magic away from the League. It's no wonder the Crown is having an effect on his mind. If not for the Crown, maybe he'd be able to see just how reckless it is to chase something as destructive as anti-magick.

TIME GEM

By far our Master's most difficult challenge to create.

*Time has no master save the bearer of this gemstone.
CURSE: To manipulate time is to forfeit your own.
REMEDY: The discovery of the Vampir curse provides
immortality, giving us infinite years to sacrifice to the gem.*

“Amari!” shouts Lara.

I whirl, fearing another booby trap. But Lara’s just staring at a glowing circle in the air before her—a portal. But whose?

I breathe out a sigh of relief when Lucas steps through.

Lucas smiles when he sees me, his eyes going straight to the Wonders. He seems even more relieved than I am. “You found them.”

I rush over, grinning. “You’re okay! What about Hannah? Did you find her?”

“Amari . . .” There’s a note of warning in Lara’s voice.

“It’s just Lucas,” I say. “He can track me . . .”

Lara aims her Stun Stick. “Why show up now? Awfully convenient, don’t you think?”

I shake my head. “He’s on our side.”

“Then where’s he been all day?” she asks.

I turn to look at Lucas. “You went looking for Hannah, right? After you escaped from the cabin?”

“I . . .”

“You did find her, didn’t you?” I ask again.

“I never escaped the cabin . . .” Lucas lowers his eyes and dread pools in my gut. “I’m so sorry,” he says. “This was the only way. I—I didn’t have a choice.”

I step back, confused. The last time I saw him was just after we’d pulled the mural through the portal into my dorm room. He’d gone out to face the guards, buying us enough time to get away. Escaping for him should’ve been simple—all he had to do was teleport someplace safe.

Unless it wasn’t only those guards who’d confronted him. There’s one person who *could* keep Lucas from teleporting to safety—the boy who controls all the League’s magic.

The jolt of absolute dread I feel is like a lightning strike.

Sure enough, Dylan Van Helsing steps through the portal next, a smug grin on his face. “It’s true, Lucas made things incredibly difficult for me. But once I threatened Hannah, well . . . you can guess the rest.”

I think about the footsteps that sent me crawling under that armchair at Lara's house, and the strange shadow trailing us on the Wandering Isles. Times we'd maybe heard or seen something but explained it away. And now Lucas showing up here. "You've had Lucas tracking me."

A grin splits Dylan's face. "And then you called me into your little Dream Meet. I'll admit, I was struggling at the time, but not so much that I couldn't seize the opportunity you offered so freely."

I cover my mouth. "I didn't pull Moreau's apprentice from your head—you showed him to me. You wanted me to seek him out. You've been waiting for us to find the Wonders."

Dylan nods. "I had other plans in motion as well, but this one turned out to be the winner. I'd promised myself I would never set foot in the Sightless Depths again. Not for anything. I'm grateful you did it for me."

Lara steps in front of me, pointing her Stun Stick. "Go away, Dylan. *Please.*"

"*Please,*" Dylan mocks. "Oh, I'll leave, dearest sister—but I'll be the *only* person leaving this room alive."

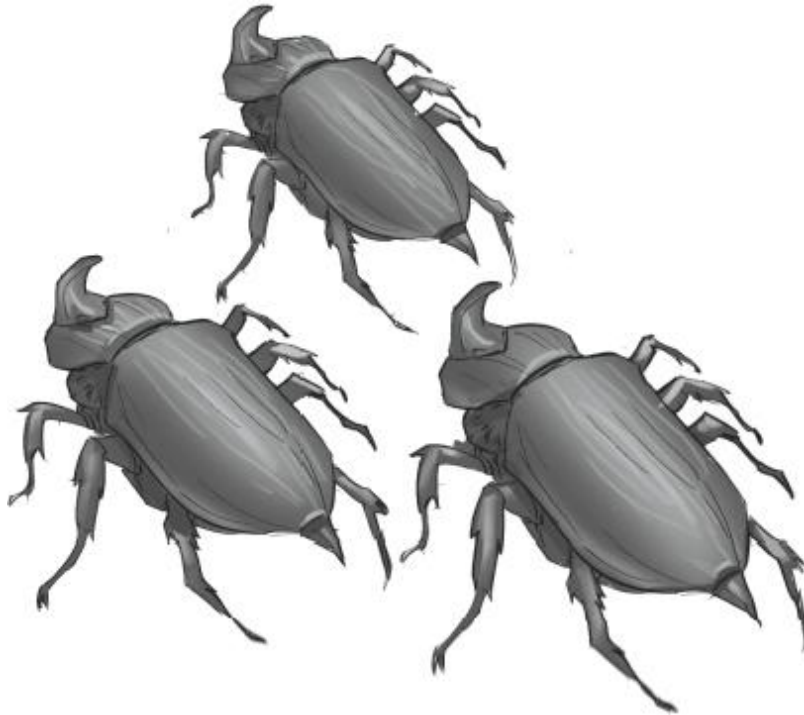
He steps forward, hands igniting in flames.

Laughter echoes throughout the chamber. But it isn't Dylan's.

Illusions appear in all four corners of the room. Each showing the same old man shrouded in robes, a dark smile lighting his face.

Raoul Moreau.

As if things weren't bad enough already.



“DYLAN VAN HELSING—I WONDERED IF YOU’D FIND the way to my Wonders.” Moreau’s illusion snickers. “Always asking about them, and how they work. By now you must know that only someone born to magic may access this workshop safely. That is the reason I shared its location with my apprentice, and never you. He cannot come here alone as you can. He can never steal from me as you clearly intend to do. It’s why I’ve created this curse specifically for you.”

“You wouldn’t risk destroying your precious Wonders,” Dylan shouts back.

“Ah, but there are two versions of this curse,” the illusion returns. “One, a simple lesson in humility, provided I am still alive.” His voice becomes a growl. “And one to reunite us, should I be dead.”

Scarab beetles pour from the walls, hissing as they scuttle toward us. They devour everything in their path—wooden workbenches, metal tools, it makes no difference.

I back up to put some distance between me and the oncoming swarm.

Dylan bares his teeth and sends a torrent of fire at the scarabs. But the beetles pass through the flames undeterred. If anything, they seem hungrier now, and move faster.

Moreau's illusion looks on in delight. *"Did I forget to mention my pets are immune to your magic?"*

Dylan lunges for the Wonders, grabbing hold of the horn first, and then swiping the Lens of Increase just seconds before I can. He shoves me to the floor, frowning up at the chart of Despicable Wonders before sprinting back toward the portal at the center of the room.

Lara uses her supernatural speed to tackle him before he gets there.

I get to my feet, dancing around the closest of the scarabs. I draw my Stun Stick and turn back to Dylan, but Lara's on top of him, so I can't get a clear shot.

Dylan ignites flames that force Lara to back off. Before she can launch another attack on him, Lucas shoves her from behind, sending her stumbling.

I re-aim my Stun Stick but Lucas is suddenly beside me, knocking it from my hands.

It's all the time Dylan needs to get to his feet and back through the portal.

Lucas throws a pained look my way. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to betray you. If Dylan doesn't return with the Lens, his goons will hurt Hannah." And then Lucas is through the portal too, closing their escape route behind him.

The scarabs stop in their tracks the moment Dylan is gone. The Moreau illusion winks out too. That curse really was crafted for one specific person. But my relief doesn't last as it hits me what's just happened. "Dylan's got the Lens!" I cry. "And we led him straight to it."

Lara shakes her head. "What about the other Wonders? Is the nameless knife still there? We can still use it to destroy the Lens if we get another shot at Dylan."

"Stay put and I'll check," I say. "There might still be curses you could trigger."

I turn to where the worktable once stood. There's nothing left but a pile of motionless scarabs. But a second look reveals a gleam of gold. Something the scarabs weren't able to devour.

The nameless knife.

I step closer, cringing at the crunch of beetles beneath my feet, and pull the knife free. Remembering the Wonders are cursed, I look at the chart on the wall. Thankfully it's placed above the crevice where the scarabs came from so they didn't destroy it.

THE REGRETFUL BLADE

*With the creation of this Wonder,
his ambitions became solely focused on destruction.*

*This Blade will obliterate anything it touches,
leaving nothing behind.*

*CURSE: The only Wonder forged without magic, this Blade was
crafted with anti-magick alone. A weapon that destroys both its
target and its wielder.*

REMEDY: None found. DO NOT USE.

I nearly drop my Stun Stick.

It's no wonder the scarabs couldn't devour the blade. This is what the Eternal Spiders were trying to warn me about. The knife works purely through anti-magick. Even the person using it can't escape its power.

We wondered why the first magician's apprentices hadn't used the knife to destroy the other Wonders. And why the Night Brothers left it behind. *This* is why.

But in that vision on the Wandering Isles, I saw myself pick it up. And I saw myself holding the Lens too. I'm supposed to be the one who uses the knife to destroy the Lens. It's why my life thread ends. It must be.

It's all I can do not to throw up. My head feels suddenly woozy.

"Amari?" calls Lara. "Is the knife there? We need to go check on Jayden and Elsie."

Hearing my friends' names yanks me out of my own head. The Regretful Blade has a gold sheath around it, so I just slip it into my pocket.

I can't tell Lara. I won't make her choose between saving me or the world. So I say, "Dylan must've taken the knife too. It's not here."

Lara slumps against a workbench. "This is bad."

I don't risk taking Lara back up that dangerous staircase. Instead, I use the Lockless Key to transport us aboveground. We need to grab Jayden and Elsie and decide our next move.

Only there's no one else up here.

Lara and I exchange a glance.

"Maybe they just wanted to get away from the creepy well?" Even as I say the words, I know it can't be true. My friends wouldn't abandon us like that.

"Hey!" Lara calls to the trees. "Come back so we can go."

"L-Lara," I say. "What if Dylan came here first before going into the well? What if he's got Jayden and Elsie?" It's the only thing that makes sense.

Lara pales.

I feel numb. My mind is reeling, trying to process too many horrible realities at once. Dylan has the Lens. The Wonder that can stop him will also end me. And my friends are missing.

I don't realize Lara's shaking me until she gets right up in my face.

"I know things are bad," she says. "But you can't go to pieces on me, Peters."

I blink, tears streaming from my eyes. "What do we even do?"

"Back to the Bureau," she says. "We don't have a choice. We need to tell them what happened."

The main hall of the Department of Supernatural Investigations is empty. And completely silent.

Lara looks down at her transporter, confused, as if maybe we aren't in the right place.

But we are. We're standing at the bottom of the giant U-shaped hallway, completely alone.

"That red alert," I say. "Weren't all agents supposed to report here?"

"Yeah," she answers. "I don't know what's going on."

Panic threatens to drown me again, but I force myself to focus. "Let's check the Operations Bay. Maybe everyone's there."

"Good thinking," says Lara. "Hop on my back."

Normally I'd object, but this is as urgent as it gets. We need to tell someone about Dylan finding the Lens. Now that he has it, there's nothing stopping him from destroying all of supernatural Atlanta.

Lara races up the hallway in seconds and skids to a stop. The giant screens lining the far wall all show the same shot of a warehouse. Magnus stands alone in the center of the room, staring up at them.

The door is locked, so we pound on the glass wall.

Magnus jumps. He squints over at us before coming to let us in.

“What in the world are you two doing here?” asks Magnus. “The Bureau’s been evacuated.”

“Dylan’s got the Wonder he was looking for,” I say. “He’ll be able to control anti-magick now.”

Magnus swears under his breath. “And we were worried about the storm. It’s bad enough that every weather organization in the known world is looking into it, with all that rain we thought he might try flooding the Bureau too, what with us being underground.”

“Where is everyone?” Lara asks.

“Counterstrike.” Magnus points up at the screens. “We got a tip that Dylan and the League are holed up in that warehouse on the edge of town. We’ve got every one of our agents poised to raid the place. Even got Special Agents from other Bureaus in on the operation.” His eyes shift to the corner of the room, where a figure sits in handcuffs.

It’s Harlowe. The faun sneers at me and I shoot her a nasty look right back.

“What’s *she* doing here?” I ask. “She’s a criminal!”

Magnus shows me his palms. “Calm down. Harlowe’s had a block placed on her supernatural ability. Permanently this time. She’s as harmless as a mouse.”

“She should be in jail,” I say.

“And she will be,” says Magnus. “But first she’s gonna help us out with any questions we might have during the raid. She’s the only reason we even know where the League is. Managed to get free and turned herself in.”

Harlowe sits up a little straighter. “I expect my cooperation will be taken into consideration when I go to trial.”

Magnus sighs. “Deal’s a deal.”

I shake my head. “You guys still don’t get it. Dylan doesn’t make mistakes like that. I would know, he’s gotten the better of me too many times.”

Harlowe scoffs.

“We had Fiona read the faun’s intentions,” says Magnus. “She didn’t detect any lies, or even that Harlowe was being forced to tell us anything. Besides, the intel turned out to be good.”

“I’m sure it was,” I say. “But Dylan knows how the Bureau works and how you think. He’s not in his right mind, but he’s still brilliant.”

“You think it’s a trap?” Lara asks.

“It has to be,” I say.

“But you said it yourself,” says Magnus. “Dylan only just got the tool he needs to use anti-magick. Harlowe’s been in our custody for hours.”

“Say what you will about me,” says Harlowe. “But I’ve always been loyal to the Bureau. To think that I’d assist in some plot—that I would help those filthy magicians—is preposterous!”

Ignoring her, Lara says, “What if gaining anti-magick was Dylan’s backup plan? After all, there was never any guarantee that he’d find the Wonder he needed.”

“Go on,” says Magnus.

So she does. “One of Dylan’s requests was to disband the Bureau, right? To make sure agents couldn’t come after magicians ever again. Wanna know a really good way to do that? Lure as many agents as possible into a trap and destroy them—which is easier than ever now that he *can* wield anti-magick.”

Magnus nods, his expression grave. “And the storm was what, a distraction?”

I shake my head. “The storm was to make you desperate, I think. It’s like a hurricane out there, except those don’t just appear out of nowhere. And the longer it goes on, the more obvious it becomes that it’s unnatural. The known world is going to want answers—to understand what’s happening. An investigation like that risks exposing our world. Dylan would know the Bureau would come after him with as many agents as possible to make it stop.”

“What I don’t get is why he let Harlowe go,” asks Lara. “Dylan could’ve used her mind-control ability against us.”

Harlowe is fuming. “As if—”

“Quiet.” Magnus cuts her off. “I wanna hear this.”

I bite my lip. “The block on Harlowe’s mind control, can it be done from anywhere?”

Magnus shakes his head. "The elves need to be in the same room to do it. And it takes about an hour."

"So Harlowe was still a threat until she turned herself in," I say. "Would you risk sending so many agents to one place if you knew Dylan could use Harlowe to take control of their minds? Wouldn't you be more cautious?"

Magnus's frown deepens. "Can't say I like how much sense you're making. Come with me." He leans over the nearest desk and taps a few buttons until my brother's face appears on one screen and Director Van Helsing appears on another. Instead of normal agent suits, both wear military helmets and fatigues.

"Located our missing Junior Agents," says Magnus. "They say Dylan succeeded in finding the Wonders. It's very likely he can wield anti-magick now."

We watch as relief turns to shock for both men.

"You've got to call off the raid," I say. "Dylan *wants* you to attack. It's a trap."

Director Van Helsing answers. "If Dylan's got anti-magick, that's all the more reason to stop him now before he can use it against the entire supernatural world." He pauses, his face filling with emotion. "My son is too clever. We may never get another shot at him."

Quinton lowers his head. "We'll be asking a lot of people to run into such impossible odds. It was difficult enough when he just had the Crown, but now . . ."

"It's what we do as agents," says Director Van Helsing. "It's why we give the warning to trainees. We are real-life superheroes, but that also means we don't always make it back. But it's your call, Magnus. You're Director now."

We both turn to look at Agent Magnus. A shiny gold name tag sits on his jacket.

*Director Beauregarde Magnus
Department of Supernatural Investigations*

When did that happen?

Magnus runs a hand across his forehead. "Give me a moment to think. In the meantime, if you see any sign of anti-magick, get in and put a stop to it before it's too late."

“Orders received,” says Van Helsing.

“Orders received,” says Quinton. “Amari—” He stops himself. “We’ll talk when I get back. Love you, Sis.”

The giant screens shift back to an overhead view of the warehouse.

Magnus falls heavily into one of the chairs. “Picked a fine time for a promotion, didn’t I?”

“Don’t you dare call off this mission!” shouts Harlowe. “The way those beasts mocked my being a faun. They *taunted* me, calling me Prime Minister of the Vault. Oh, they thought they were so high and mighty, telling me to use my mind control on them when they knew it wouldn’t work. Telling me to make them surrender if I could.”

A horrible thought jumps into my head. “And did you? Try to make them surrender?”

Harlowe’s lip quivers. “I screamed the order till I was red in the face, not that it made any difference.”

My heart sinks. “That vault I found you in, is that where it happened?”

Harlowe frowns. “Yes, it wasn’t until after I first escaped that I was moved to the warehouse.”

“There were surveillance cameras in that vault,” I say.

“Meaning what?” asks Lara.

“Harlowe forced you to come to the Victory Gala over a phone call,” I tell her. “They don’t need Harlowe, only her voice. They were recording her.”

Magnus’s eyes go wide and he turns to the screen. Bright blue light flashes in the windows of the warehouse. Anti-magick.

Magnus mashes a button on his console. “Call off the raid!”

But it’s too late. Agents are already entering the building through every door and window, Stun Sticks raised.

“Switch to helmet-cam view,” he says.

One of the screens switches to shaky footage of an agent charging through a loading dock. She’s surrounded by other agents who all flood a massive hangar, where Dylan and a few dozen magicians stand in bright red cloaks.

The magicians don’t even react. They might as well be statues.

As the agents approach from all sides, Dylan only laughs.

In the next moment Harlowe’s voice booms through the warehouse intercom, and every agent stops cold, laying down their Stun Sticks and

raising their hands in surrender.



MMAGNUS SLAMS BOTH HIS FISTS ONTO THE CONSOLE. “No!”

Harlowe sinks into her chair, face aghast. “You need only believe the words are meant for you for my magic to work. But I never imagined it could be used like that.” Beside me, Lara covers her mouth.

Arachne’s warning bounces though my head. If I don’t see this through, every possible future leads to Dylan wiping out countless life threads.

“Agent Magnus,” I say, my voice shaking. “Do you trust me?”

He turns, his face still raw with emotion. “What are you asking me, kid?”

“I need to borrow your cell phone,” I say. “And a transporter. Then I need you to let me go.”

“Go where?” he asks, incredulous.

Even Lara turns to look at me.

“It has to be me,” I tell Lara. She doesn’t know everything the spiders told me, but she knows that much.

Resolve settles into Lara’s features, and she turns to face Magnus. “It has to be Peters. The Eternal Spiders said so.”

“The who?” asks Magnus.

“Doesn’t matter,” I say. “I’m begging you to trust me. Same as you always have. Can you do that?”

Magnus looks ready to refuse, but something in my face must tell him how serious I am. Because he just looks at me for a moment and then says, “You’ve got a plan?”

“I do,” I answer. “But I’m the only one who can carry it out.”

Magnus runs his fingers over his hair. “I’m coordinating with other Directors around the globe on this. It’s why I’m here and not out there. . . . Can’t believe I’m agreeing to this, but what do you need?”

Relief pours through me. “Cell phone and transporter. Oh, and the coordinates to the warehouse. But somewhere out of the way.”

While Magnus pulls up the coordinates and a map of the building, I turn to Lara. “Back me up one last time?” It’s out before I can catch myself.

Her brow furrows. “Of course I’ll back you up. But what’s with the one last time stuff?”

I shake my head. “Sorry, I’m being dramatic. Listen, we didn’t start off as friends, but I couldn’t have asked for a better partner. You’re every bit the hero Maria is. And you mean just as much to me as Quinton or Elsie or anyone.”

Lara gives me a strange look. “Thanks, but stop talking like we’re going to lose. Your plan is a good one, right?”

“I’ll let you know when we get there,” I say.

In just a few minutes, we’re ready to go. We stand side by side, both our sleeves pulled back to teleport into the warehouse. She and I count down, but I let her leave without me.

“Agent Magnus,” I say, meeting his eyes. “You never let me quit. And you kept giving me chances when I messed up. The reason I believe in myself as an agent, and the reason I know I can save everyone, is you. You’re going to make a great Director.”

I mash the button on my transporter and vanish.

I draw my Stun Stick the instant I appear inside the warehouse. But the only things surrounding me are vending machines. Lara waits near the doorway, peeking into the hall.

“Took you long enough,” she says.

“Sorry,” I say. “We’re headed to the main office. Magnus showed me the route.”

We tiptoe out of the employee break room and into an empty hallway.

Usually Lara leads, but since I know the route, I step out first and she watches our rear. I keep my Stun Stick pointed straight ahead, just like we’re taught to do in Junior Agent training.

We creep through the hallways, doing our best not to bring attention to ourselves.

“The staircase we need is just around the corner,” I say. “We’re headed up.”

“Gotcha.”

The stairs are loud, so we take them slowly. Can’t let our footsteps echo.

Halfway up we start to hear muffled shouts.

We pick up the pace. The yelling becomes clearer once we’ve reached the top, where a metal railing overlooks the warehouse floor.

I gasp. A massive orb of swirling blue light hovers in the air before us. It looks just like what I saw in the Kaman Project footage and in the Congress Room, only it’s not exploding. It’s slowly getting bigger.

The Lens really has focused the anti-magick into something controllable.

Dylan Van Helsing sits cross-legged at the far end of the room. The horn-shaped Wonder lies broken in two before him, and he holds the Lens just above it, channeling the sparking anti-magick from the Wonder’s innards into the massive sphere of anti-magick above him.

Cozmo just stands there, looking anxious but doing nothing to stop Dylan. Because this is who he believes will keep magicians safe. Whatever the cost.

There are fifty more magicians at his back. I wonder if those are all that's left of the League—the only magicians who've shown enough blind loyalty to be allowed to keep their magic. The League once had hundreds of members. If the only remedy for the Crown's madness is to share magic, then that Crown must be taking a terrible toll on him.

And I can see it in Dylan's expression. He looks unhinged, grinning from ear to ear.

"The time has come, ladies and gentlemen," he calls, "to test out my new toy!"

My heart skips a beat as the shimmering blue mass drops away from us, down toward a hangar full of agents in tactical gear.

No, no, no! I grip the rail, feeling helpless as the agents below stare up in horror. I realize they can't move, not to fight back or even retreat. Harlowe's order to surrender means they are stuck in place with their hands up, completely at Dylan's mercy.

The agents barely have time to scream before the anti-magick hurtles through an entire section of the massive hangar, leaving nothing behind.

In seconds, whole squadrons are gone. Like they were never there.

I feel sick. Quinton's down there somewhere. My hands tremble as I frantically search the agents for any sign of my brother. It's all I can do to keep myself from screaming his name.

Tilting the Lens, Dylan steers the ever-growing mass of anti-magick toward helpless agents who shout in fear, then spares them at the last possible moment. He cackles.

This is a game to him.

Lara stands frozen beside me. "My brother is truly gone," she whispers. "That's a monster down there now."

"Do you see Jayden and Elsie?" I ask. "What about your dad? VanQuish?"

Lara scans the warehouse floor and shakes her head. "Y-you don't think he's hurt any of them, do you?"

I shake my head because I can't let myself think otherwise. "We need to cross that steel catwalk to get to the main office."

"That'll take us directly over Dylan and those magicians," says Lara.

"It's the best route to get there without being seen."

Lara nods, and we start in that direction.

Below, Dylan spins, his red magician's cloak fluttering behind him. The giant ball of anti-magick twirls with him overhead, steered by the Lens. "I had planned on luring you all here and disposing of you with fire. But now you'll get the privilege of watching me destroy the Bureau you care about so much."

He strides forward into the crowd of surrendered agents and calls to one of his magicians. "These two—take off their helmets."

The magician rips the headgear from a pair of agents, revealing Quinton and Maria.

Emotion wars within me, both relief that they're okay and terror at the danger they're in. I've got to get to the main office and put a stop to this before it's too late.

Dylan smiles. "VanQuish—the mighty heroes riding in to save the day from the horrible magicians once again."

"Dylan." Maria's voice is strained. "It's not too late to stop this."

Lara's frozen. There's no one in the world that girl loves more than her big sister.

"Lara," I whisper. "We've got to keep going. If we can get to the office, we can save them."

But my partner doesn't hear me.

"Oh, Maria," Dylan says mockingly. "Did it never occur to you to be suspicious? Did you never think maybe your brother is too clever to be caught this easily?" When Maria doesn't answer, he continues. "Of course not. You two are so used to things going your way."

He kicks Maria's legs out from under her and she goes down with a groan. Beside me, Lara gasps.

"Leave your sister alone!" Quinton roars.

But Dylan just laughs. "Or what?" He lowers the Lens, stopping the massive ball of anti-magick just above Maria's head.

Quinton's eyes go wide. "*Please—*"

Lara is up and over the side of the catwalk before I can stop her. She lands clumsily, but her athleticism and training allow her to break the worst of the fall and she charges Dylan. I hold my breath. The ball of anti-magick flashes bright, zipping in her direction, but her supernatural reflexes allow her to dodge it.

But she doesn't see a steel gate tearing itself free from the floor. It slams down in front of her with more gates following, until they've formed

a metal cage around her. Even Lara's supernatural strength can't get her free.

A magician steps forward from the group to take a bow. The others erupt in laughter.

I use the distraction to sprint across the remainder of the catwalk and don't stop until I'm in the main office, where I duck behind a desk and pull out Agent Magnus's phone.

Please let this work. I open the Eurg app to access my profile but my trembling fingers accidentally press the log-out button. My heart sinks.

I'll just have to do it again. I retype my log-in info as fast as I can and press enter.

Magnus's ancient phone takes forever. I've got no choice but to wait.

"*Amari . . .*" Dylan's voice echoes through the warehouse. "Come out, come out wherever you are."

I peek around the desk to find Dylan hovering above the catwalk. The anti-magick floats just above him, poised to strike.

My eyes drop to the phone again. Still loading.

I really don't wanna die because of crappy cell service.

"I know you're around here somewhere," says Dylan. "It would be a shame to have poor Quinton pay the price for you being difficult. But I'm glad you're here. You get to see firsthand just how far you must be willing to go to protect magicians."

I can't let him bait me like he did with Lara. If I don't stop Dylan here and now, so many innocent supernaturals will die. My friends, my brother . . . they're all at this one boy's mercy.

Finally the app opens. I click on my messages and open the one Lara sent me where Harlowe used mind control to force her to attend the Victory Gala. I fast-forward until it gets to the part I need.

Then I scream Dylan's name.

In an instant he's at the door of the office, carried on a gust of wind. I draw out my Stun Stick and shift it to my other hand. Either my plan works or I make my final stand right here, right now.

I turn on the intercom and press play. Harlowe's voice booms through the speakers. "*On second thought, forget what I just said . . .*"

Commotion breaks out below. Followed by shouting.

Through the windows, I see agents picking up their Stun Sticks. The magicians surge forward and suddenly the warehouse floor is a battlefield,

with Stun Stick blasts and supernatural abilities clashing with spells of all kinds.

Dylan is so stunned he stumbles, the momentary loss of concentration sending the massive orb of anti-magick careening up through the glass ceiling.

In panic, Dylan tries to twist the Lens to regain control, but it's too far gone, the anti-magick disappearing into the black storm clouds above.

Dylan growls with rage, his gaze turning to meet mine.

I aim my Stun Stick, unsure what I'm supposed to do next. Sure I've got the Regretful Blade, but how do I even get close to him? He's the most powerful magician in the world, and I've barely got any magic at all.

What I do know is that I'm supposed to be here. I'm the one who has to face him.

Aiming my Stun Stick, I fire a shot that only just misses his shoulder.

Dylan sneers, and I brace for his retaliation. For his flames or shadows. Maybe he'll send a bolt of lightning my way. He looks ready to finish me once and for all.

But Dylan does none of those things. Instead, he turns and runs. So fast he drops the Lens and doesn't look back.

I'm so confused it takes me a few seconds to react. What's he doing?

I can't make sense of it. I sprint forward to claim the Lens and pull the Regretful Blade from my back pocket. Hope surges through me. Maybe I don't have to destroy the Lens now. He can't control anti-magick without it. I did what the spiders wanted, I faced down Dylan Van Helsing. I was true to what they showed me.

Or was I?

The last images of their vision flash through my head again. Me picking up the Regretful Blade. Now here I am with the Lens of Increase.

But there was one more image—me face-to-face with Dylan.

With a jolt, I realize what the spiders were trying to tell me. The threat hanging over all those life threads isn't anti-magick, it's Dylan himself.

If I don't stop him for good, then he'll only come up with another horrible scheme and try again. Look how much damage he was able to do with that storm. How many people are out there suffering right now?

I've got to destroy the Crown and break his power once and for all.

No matter the cost.

I slip the Regretful Blade back into my pocket and get to my feet. I sprint down the catwalk, the battle between agents and magicians raging all around me.

I catch up to Dylan in the hallway, back near the employee break room where me and Lara arrived. When he sees me, he ducks inside before I can take another shot.

I'm stunned he's so unwilling to fight me. But an idea is forming in my head.

I tuck and roll into the break room, spinning around in the same motion to aim my Stun Stick. But Dylan had the same training I did. He sidesteps my shot and twists my arm, wrenching hard enough that I drop it.

He dives for the Stun Stick, but it rolls under a snack machine before he can reach it. He gets back to his feet, his eyes shifting over my shoulder to the exit. He wants to run.

I almost laugh. "You've got as much magic right now as I do."

Dylan growls. "Out of my way, Amari."

I shake my head, certain I'm right. I watched him frown as he read the Despicable Wonders chart in the Night Brothers workshop. "That's the curse of the Lens of Increase. It lets you magnify your spells, even anti-magick, but it leaves you powerless after. Probably only temporary, but long enough for me to break your Crown."

Dylan balks at that. "You don't have enough magic."

So I show him the Regretful Blade. Real fear flashes in his eyes.

Before I can unsheathe the knife, Dylan rushes me, slamming my back into a Coke machine. But instead of following up with another blow, he tries to slip out the door.

I grab his leg and pull him down, the Crown tumbling off his head. I scramble to my feet first and grab it, starting down the hallway.

I only get halfway before it leaps out of my grip as if attached to a rubber band. Right back into Dylan's arms. It's almost as though it knows I mean to destroy it.

"The Crown is mine!" Dylan shouts.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I turn to face him again. This time I charge, and he uses my momentum to flip me over, slamming my body onto the floor. Black spots fill my vision.

"Only one of us has been training to be an agent since birth." Dylan appears over me. He's holding the Blade.

I flinch, but he tosses it aside with a humorless laugh. “You stupid girl, don’t you know this destroys its wielder too?”

Dylan moves for the door again and I pull myself up to stumble after him. Unsure how I’m supposed to win but also knowing I have to try.

At the sight of me coming, he spins to shove me and a gust of wind throws me against a snack machine.

Dylan stares at his hands, his face lighting up. “Seems the curse isn’t as bad as I thought. My magic is returning already.”

My whole body hurts as he stalks toward me, sparks dancing over his fingertips.

I slump.

Dylan laughs. “Giving up?”

The moment he’s close enough, I kick out my leg to trip him. At the same time, I reach for my Stun Stick beneath the snack machine.

I zap him before he even hits the ground.

Dylan goes rigid, unable to move.

I crawl over to the Regretful Blade and pick it up. Dylan’s eyes go wide with panic. Breathing hard, and hurting with every step, I make my way back and pluck the Crown from Dylan’s head.

He struggles against the effects of the Stun Stick. Tears prick the corners of his eyes.

“Please, Amari . . .,” he says. “I have to save us. Things can’t go back to the way they used to be. Magicians have to be free.”

“Stop lying to yourself,” I say. “Maybe you used to believe that, but you’re lost, Dylan. You’ve gotta be stopped.”

“Y-you won’t do it,” he says. “It’ll destroy you.”

I shake my head. “When I lost the Great Game, you said it was because I wouldn’t do whatever it took to win. But you know what I’ve learned? I’ll do whatever’s necessary to save the people I care about.”

Squeezing the Regretful Blade, I plunge it into the shimmering black Crown.

And it shatters, the scattered pieces flickering as they begin to fade away.

Dylan lets out a howl. “What have you done?”

I couldn’t answer him if I wanted to. Chilling numbness rips up my arm and uncoils inside my chest. The strange sensation races down my legs

into the tips of my toes. And then it feels like I don't even have a body anymore. Like I'm not here at all.

I hold up my hand, still clutching the knife, to find myself flickering and fading away.

I don't feel myself falling until I hit the ground, hard. I blink a few times, my hand still clutching the knife. No matter how hard I try to uncurl my fist from the hilt, it won't allow me to let go.

The world dims and then brightens. Someone's carrying me.

Quinton's face appears above mine, as frightened as I've ever seen it. Maria and Lara join him. Maria looks confused, while Lara stares down at me as if she's seeing a ghost.

And maybe that's all I am now. Because the world dims again, and it feels like I'm slipping away into someplace else. Somewhere peaceful.

Then the world brightens and I'm suddenly back in the warehouse, only there are agents all around me now. Agents Magnus and Fiona are here, everyone's eyes on Lara as she speaks, her finger pointing to the knife in my hand.

In all the chaos, I see Magnus's eyes meet Fiona's. It only lasts a second but Fiona's face crumples as she gives the barest of nods.

And then I feel Magnus tugging at the knife, brushing Quinton aside. His fingers slip between my own, so that he's clutching the knife too.

No! He doesn't understand what this knife will do to him. He thinks he's saving me, but it's not that simple. The Blade has a cost that must be paid.

I feel myself fade again, the world dimming so much I can't imagine ever coming back to the light. And when I do, I know it's for the last time. The next time I start to fade I'll be gone for good.

I try to say goodbye, but I can't hear myself speak. I don't know if I'm actually saying words.

Tears pour down my face as my eyes settle on Magnus, his gaze meeting my own. He leans down close, putting his mouth to my ear. "I told you once that nothing comes before protecting the kids you love. You got a whole life to live and I mean to have you see it all. If I've ever meant anything to you, you'll let me do this, kid. You gotta let go."

So I do.



I LIE ON MY BACK, BLINKING UP AT THE WAREHOUSE RAFTERS, a whirlwind of activity around me. My friends are crowded out by other faces I don't recognize—they lean in, pointing and prodding, shouting questions and writing on notepads. A fairy snaps a photo and is promptly shooed away by agents.

The former Director Van Helsing appears next, and he looks me over before barking, “Agent down over here! Clear a path for the cursebreakers! And can somebody remove the press? This is still an active crime scene!”

Cursebreakers surround me in their combat medic gear. They place strange scopes on my chest and forehead and even the bottoms of my feet. It’s not until I feel them lift me onto a stretcher that I fully come out of my daze. The idea of leaving fills me with a sudden panic. I need to find Agent Magnus. Need to stop him from taking the knife.

But it’s too late for that.

Because there’s a second crowd gathered around an empty space where the Regretful Blade lies on the concrete floor. Agent Fiona is bent beside it, covering her face.

I feel like I could throw up. An aching sadness clamps down hard on my chest, making it hard to breathe. I’m shivering as I’m rolled toward the warehouse entrance, where Quinton and Maria address Chief Crowe and a few other agents.

When Maria notices me freaking out, she steps over and takes my hand. “You poor thing. Lie down.” She takes my hand, and then pulls it away to stare at her own, confused. It dawns on me that she was about to use her magic on me, but without the Crown to share magic, there are no magicians left except for me and Dylan. We’re the only two born magicians.

The League of Magicians is no more.

Maria doesn’t dwell on the discovery. Instead she says something to the nearest cursebreaker and gives my hand a squeeze. “It’s time to rest now.”

Before I can protest, someone places a metal rod against my arm. It looks an awful lot like a Stun Stick, only this thing has a label that reads *Medicine Stamp*. It feels cool against my skin, leaving behind a sleeping emoji in yellow ink.

I stare at it. *Did they really just . . .*

I’m asleep before I can finish the thought.

When my eyes open, I’m back in my bedroom. Mama sits next to me in that lumpy recliner from the living room, tapping away at her phone.

“Mama?” I try to sit up, but my head goes all woozy.

She drops her phone and reaches over to take hold of my shoulders. “Maria said to take it easy for a few minutes once you woke up. They gave

you strong sleeping medication to calm you down.”

I shake my head. “But how did I get here—wait, you know who I am?”

She nods and smiles. “Your brother restored my memories this morning. You can imagine the talking-to he received upon informing me that my youngest child had been magicked to sleep. Like this family ain’t had enough bad experiences with sleeping spells already.”

I’m so confused. “Mama, I had the most horrible dream—”

“Wasn’t no dream,” Mama says softly.

“Magnus?” I ask.

“Is gone, sweetie.”

The sudden ache I feel hollows me out. For a moment I can’t even speak.

Mama fills the silence, wiping her suddenly teary eyes. “It’s the kind of debt that can never be repaid. I’m just so grateful that you’re safe.”

“He was going to get married,” I say. “To Agent Fiona.”

She just nods.

“I need to talk to her,” I say. “To apologize.”

“But Maria said—”

“I don’t care what Maria said!” I pull myself up and get to my feet. This time Mama doesn’t try to stop me. I get as far as the door before I crumple, sobbing, and she comes over to hold me.

My friends are all waiting in the living room when me and Mama come out.

“Don’t mind me,” says Mama. “I’ll be in my bedroom while y’all talk things over.”

“Amari!” Elsie immediately jumps to her feet, rushing over to throw her arms around me. Jayden follows, his long arms pulling us both in tight.

“I’m so glad you two are okay,” I say. “Were you at the warehouse too?”

Elsie nods. “Locked in a closet.”

“We could hear everything happening but couldn’t get out,” says Jayden. “Don’t go taking this the wrong way, Lara—but seeing your dad kick in that door was the first time I ever been glad to see his face.”

I look over at Lara, who stands at the edge of the group, arms crossed. “You lied to me about the Regretful Blade.”

“I thought it would be easier if you didn’t know,” I say.

Elsie and Jayden move to Lara's side, and I can tell she's speaking for all of them.

"You're right in thinking we'd never have let you use it had we known its curse," says Lara. "And then you were just lying there, blinking in and out—every time you vanished, I wasn't sure if you'd come back. Everyone thought you were a goner."

I think about that for a moment. That must be why my life thread ended—for a few seconds at a time I didn't exist.

"I'm so angry with you," Elsie cuts in. "But I'm also *really* glad you're okay."

Jayden nods. "You did what you had to do, I guess. I'm just glad I ain't have to see you like that."

"I owe a lot of people apologies," I say. "And it feels right to start with you guys. So I'm sorry. We went through so much this summer, and you stuck by me the whole way. No matter what. But that's also why I had to do what I did. Because I couldn't let you down again. I couldn't watch my friends get hurt when I had the power to prevent it."

Lara finally sighs, letting the tension drop from her stance.

I take the opportunity to step over and offer her a hug, saying, "Thanks for being our fearless leader."

I feel her grin. "And thanks for being our hero."

Mama cooks up some of her famous chili, and just being with my friends is enough to keep me out of my own head for a while. We stay up through the night telling her about our adventures—leaving out all the close calls, of course. Mama hangs on our every word.

Peek-a-Boo wakes up from his nap just in time to narrate how he single-handedly saved us from the Sightless Depths. And if we thought we exaggerated *our* stories, it's nothing compared to this ghost claiming he rode in on a winged unicorn waving a sword made of stardust. Mama's so impressed and thankful she tells him he's always welcome in her home—at least until he performs his signature peek-a-boo prank on her a few minutes later. Mama hates surprises. The only thing that saves him is that Jayden would have to leave too.

By the time morning comes, Mama's asleep in her room and my friends are all knocked out on the couch. But I can't close my eyes without seeing Magnus above me, taking the knife.

So I'm the only person awake when Quinton arrives early the next morning.

I don't even know what to say to him. The last time we spoke, we were fighting.

"Can we talk?" He looks defeated.

I nod, and he leads me to his room. Stepping inside makes me think of all the times I'd pester him until he let me in here. Because it meant the world to be wherever he was. There was no one I looked up to more than my big brother.

Quinton leans against his closet and I take a seat on his bed. Neither of us makes eye contact.

Finally, he speaks. "If the past twenty-four hours have taught me anything, it's that I don't always make the right call. I know I let you down. Doing this job can make it hard to stay objective sometimes. And I know that's no excuse. You just get used to viewing things—viewing *people*—a certain way. It clouds your judgment."

I look him in the eye. "If I gave in to stereotypes then I'd have believed it when folks said you were missing because you were into illegal stuff. And I'd never have found you because I would've listened when people said a girl like me shouldn't be at the Bureau."

My brother nods. "A fair point."

"I know," I say.

He comes over and sits next to me on the bed. "Do you think you could give me another chance, Chicken Little? When I'm wrong, I want to apologize, so that's what I'm doing."

I nod, and he smiles.

"Go and wake your friends," says Quinton. "There's something I want to show you."

I raise an eyebrow, but he insists. It takes us forever to get them awake, especially Elsie.

"Could we maybe brush our teeth?" she yawns.

"After," says Quinton.

"After what?" I ask.

But he doesn't answer. Instead, he pulls back his sleeves to reveal a transporter. "Everybody lock arms."

Me and my friends exchange a glance but do as we're told. A worrying idea does pop into my head—we technically disobeyed orders by sneaking

out of the Bureau to chase the Wonders. And Quinton respects the rules enough to follow them always—even if it means arresting his own sister.

“We’re not in trouble, are we?” I ask.

He shakes his head, and the world around us bends until we’re standing onstage in the underground auditorium. A roar goes up, and I see my own startled face on the giant screens as well as my friends’ faces.

The cheering doesn’t stop. Every seat is filled with members of the Bureau, uniforms from every department scattered all through the enormous space.

Elsie gives me a nudge. “They’re cheering for you, Amari.”

But I shake my head. “They’re cheering for *us*.”

And it’s true. Four kids who did what they thought was right even against orders. Against all odds too, if I’m being honest. But it’s also special because they’re cheering for a magician. Despite everything. And it makes me hopeful that people might start giving others a chance before judging who they are. Maybe it’s just wishful thinking.

For now, though, this is pretty nice.

The Bureau had a whirlwind of interviews and photo shoots planned for the rest of the day. I was even supposed to shake the hand of the newest acting Prime Minister, a respected centaur who’d retired from the Supernatural World Congress only a month before the time freeze.

But honestly, I’m just not up to it. And thankfully Quinton doesn’t press. Instead, my friends take the spotlight, and rightfully so. They’re every bit the heroes that I am, and I couldn’t have accomplished anything without them.

It doesn’t mean I refuse the Congressional Request I’ve been awarded for saving the day, though. It’s the reason I’m currently wearing the plush slippers provided by our most esteemed and luxurious elevator, Lord Kensington. Can’t get his handwoven carpet dirty.

The magic-canceling cells of Blackstone Prison whiz by on both sides, the elevator eventually snaking down to a different section, where a cage sits alone. Inside Dylan Van Helsing sits slumped on a chair.

The elevator doors open with a *whoosh*.

“Be careful,” says Lord Kensington.

“Will do,” I say.

There’s already a chair sitting next to the glass wall, so I take a seat.

“Surprise, surprise.” Dylan doesn’t look up. “Amari Peters, returned from the dead. I suppose I have you to thank for me not ending up back in the Sightless Depths?”

“If the new Prime Minister honors my Congressional Request, no one will have to suffer the Sightless Depths ever again. It’s cruel.”

Finally he meets my eyes. It startles me to see them blue again.

He laughs bitterly, holding up magic-canceling handcuffs. “Hard to follow the Foul Path when you’ve been stripped of your magic entirely—but then you’d understand how that feels, wouldn’t you?”

I nod solemnly. “You made sure of that.”

“Have you come to gloat, then? Tell me all about how kindness and love won in the end?”

“I’m not sure why I’m here exactly,” I say. “Except to say that I’ve made a decision. And for some reason I needed to tell you first. Because you’re right, we are connected. And now that we’re the only magicians left, I feel it more than ever.”

Dylan leans forward in his chair. “What kind of decision?”

“I’ve decided you’re never going to see me again,” I say. “Because I’m leaving the supernatural world behind.”

His eyes search mine, incredulous. “You can’t mean that.”

I blow out a long breath. “I wish so bad that you never let Moreau lead you to foul magick, and you never put on the Crown. Because I saw the boy you could’ve been and it breaks my heart you never got to become that. You grew up scared and alone because the world hated magicians.”

Dylan flexes his jaw. “Then you understand—”

“I’ll *never* understand,” I snap, tears spilling down my face. “The things you did were horrible. All those lives you took. And a good man, someone I cared about, is gone now because of how far I had to go to stop you. I’ll never forgive you, Dylan. That’s what I really came down here to tell you. Goodbye.”

I stand and start back for the elevator.

Behind me Dylan bangs against the glass. “Do you think it’s over? That you can just throw me away? Haven’t you ever wondered why I was so dead set on preserving magicians? Why the world needs us around? I’ve glimpsed the future—I’ve seen things!”

I ignore his shouts. I’ve said what I needed to say.

As the doors close, Dylan is still pounding on the cage. “Our story’s not over, Amari! It’s not over!”

“Lord Kensington,” I say. “Take me to Supernatural Investigations.”

The department is as busy as ever but there’s a somber mood hanging over the place. Dylan’s trap cost so many agents their lives. I try to stay unseen, and it works. The job of safeguarding our world never stops, and these are the folks that do it full-time.

It’s the Director’s office where I’m headed. With each step, I can’t help thinking of Magnus and the future he would’ve had if it weren’t for me.

When I reach the door, I have to steel myself to see Director Van Helsing. With Magnus gone, there’s no doubt they’ll have given him the job back.

And unfortunately, no matter what I do, that man will always hate me. Though I do seem to remember him referring to me as an agent back at the warehouse when he called for the cursebreakers to help me. Which is definitely progress.

My jaw drops when I see red hair in the Director’s seat. I freeze in the doorway.

Agent Fiona offers a small smile. “Come on in, lass. Meet your new Director of Supernatural Investigations.”

Agent Fiona’s the new Director? I take a few hesitant steps forward.

“Dry those eyes,” says Director Fiona, coming around the table to give me a hug. “Goodness, ye look like a deer in headlights. I’m not angry. Ye aren’t to blame for what happened.”

“Magnus is gone because of me. You must *hate* me.”

Fiona rubs my back and shakes her head. “Magnus is gone because he loved ye. Didn’t like to make it known but ye were always his favorite. The way that man would go on about ye! Don’t know if he ever told ye, but he saw a lot of himself in ye. He didn’t come from any of these fancy legacy families either, and he struggled to find his footing here as a kid. Special Agents don’t typically come back to train young’uns, but he always felt it was his duty to be the support he wished he’d had—felt it was his calling, even. So miss him, but don’t regret what he done for ye. Keep living. And make him proud.”

My emotions feel all jumbled up. How can I feel so impossibly grateful and terribly guilty for the same act? It’s too much to think about,

so I ask a different question. “You’re our new Director?”

Fiona nods. “Aye. I’ve found that keeping busy is the best medicine for grief. And with me daughter staying with me mum for the summer, I thought it wise to have a fresh start.”

“Did the chief fire Director Van Helsing?” I ask.

“Nothing so dramatic as that,” she answers. “It was just time for a new voice in the department. Van Helsing, for his part, seemed relieved by the suggestion.”

That makes sense.

“So why’ve ye come by?” asks Fiona. “Given the state of yer face when ye saw me here, it couldn’t have been for me.”

“I don’t have my badge with me, but if I did . . . I guess I’d be turning it in.”

Fiona steps back to look at me. “Oh, *lass*. We all grieve in different ways, but don’t let a moment’s feeling determine a whole lifetime. Take a while and think it over. Besides, ye didn’t hear it from me, but the higher-ups are starting a new program next summer for high-achieving Junior Agents. Supposed to help replenish our supply of Special Agents after losing so many. You’d be at the top of my list. And Magnus’s too.”

I nod and try to smile. “I’ll think about it.”

But when our eyes meet again, I think we both understand that my decision’s been made.

I head for the door, only to pause when I reach for the handle. “Even if I’m not a Junior Agent, could I FaceTime you and talk about him sometimes? I totally get if you don’t want to. Especially because . . . you know.”

Fiona blinks a few times, tears welling in her eyes. “People live on in our memories. I’d love to share some of mine with ye.”

I’m walking through the lobby of Supernatural Investigations, going back to my dorm to pack my things, when I feel a tingle in the tips of my fingers. It stops me in my tracks—because I know that feeling. I flick my wrist and a gust of wind sweeps through the empty lobby. With my other hand, I draw a bird that tweets as it flutters up to the ceiling.

My magic—it’s back!

I pull out my phone to text Elsie but stop myself. There’s something I need to do first. And I don’t care who walks in and sees me. Something tells me the new Director won’t mind.

So I walk up to the dreary old statue of Abraham Van Helsing staking Vladimir and paint an illusion that makes it invisible. And then I create a brand-new illusion, twice as tall but in black and white to match the rest of the lobby.

By the time I'm done, Agent Magnus is larger than life, just as he was when he was here. He's got on his signature cowboy hat and is stroking that fuzzy beard he loved so much.

Then I walk to the elevators and wait for Lucy to carry me away. But before I do, I turn to look at the illusion one last time and say, "Thanks for everything. No matter where I end up, I promise to make you proud."

Acknowledgments

THANK YOU FIRST AND FOREMOST TO GOD, WHO MAKES all things possible.

My second thank-you goes to Amari fans all over the world. This book was by far the hardest to write, but getting your letters and messages and seeing your posts on social media expressing how excited you are for the series was a constant source of inspiration and encouragement. As a result, I've written something I'm incredibly proud of, and I hope you feel the same. There are more Amari books on the way, and I can't wait for you to see what I've got in store for Amari and her friends!

Next, I want to thank my incredible editors Kristin Daly Rens and Liz Banks. You guys stuck by me through some tough edits, and we created something really special. I'm excited to get to work on more Amari books with you!

Thank you to Gemma Cooper, super-agent and friend. You are truly the best agent anyone could ask for, and it's a blessing to have you in my corner.

A huge thanks to my family and friends, who keep me grounded and sane throughout this crazy journey. Your unconditional love and unwavering support has meant the world to me, and I'm so incredibly grateful to you all.

Last, but not least, thanks to my wife, Quinteria, my favorite person in the world. My Day One. I can't wait to go on so many more adventures with you.

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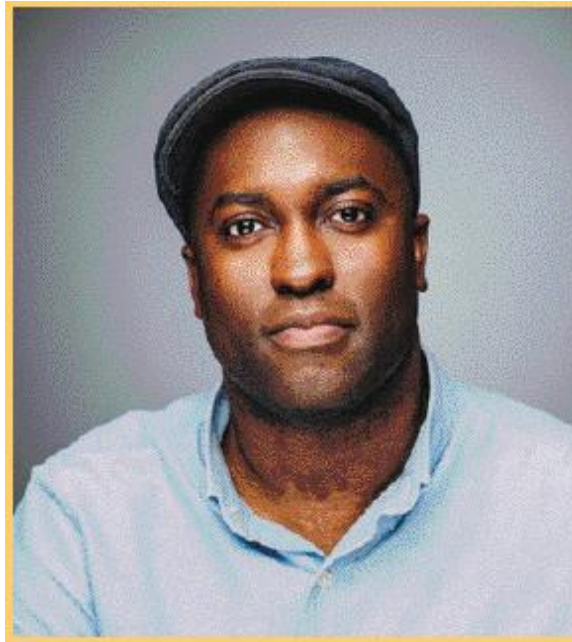


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Amari and the Night Brothers
Amari and the Great Game

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Cover art © 2024 by Godwin Akpan

Digital Edition AUGUST 2024 ISBN: 978-0-06-297524-9

Print ISBN: 978-0-06-297522-5

ISBN 978-0-06-297522-5 — ISBN 978-0-06-334140-1 (special edition)

FIRST EDITION

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